Wells Carolyn

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Wells C.

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Содержание

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I
THE GIRL ACROSS THE HALL

I do hate changes, but when my sister Laura, who keeps house for me, determined to move further uptown, I really had no choice in the matter but to acquiesce. I am a bachelor of long standing, and it's my opinion that the way to manage women is simply to humor their whims, and since Laura's husband died I've been rather more indulgent to her than before. Any way, the chief thing to have in one's household is peace, and I found I secured that easily enough by letting Laura do just as she liked; and as in return she kept my home comfortable and pleasant for me, I considered that honors were even. Therefore, when she decided we would move, I made no serious objection.

At least, not in advance. Had I known what apartment-hunting meant I should have refused to leave our Gramercy Park home.

But "Uptown" and "West Side" represented to Laura the Mecca of her desires, and I unsuspectingly agreed to her plans.

Then the campaign began.

Early every morning Laura scanned the papers for new advertisements. Later every morning she visited agents, and then spent the rest of the day inspecting apartments.

Then evenings were devoted to summing up the experiences of the day and preparing to start afresh on the morrow.

She was untiring in her efforts; always hopeful, and indeed positive that she would yet find the one apartment that combined all possible advantages and possessed no objectionable features.

At first I went with her on her expeditions, but I soon saw the futility of this, and, in a sudden access of independence, I declared I would have no more to do with the search. She might hunt as long as she chose; she might decide upon whatever home she chose; but it must be without my advice or assistance. I expressed myself as perfectly willing to live in the home she selected, but I refused to trail round in search of it.

Being convinced of my determination, my sister accepted the situation and continued the search by herself.

But evenings I was called upon as an advisory board, to hear the result of the day's work and to express an opinion. According to Laura it required a careful balancing of location and conveniences, of neighborhood and modern improvements before the momentous question should be decided.

Does an extra bathroom equal one block further west? Is an onyx-lined entrance greater than a buttoned hall-boy? Are palms in the hall worth more than a red velvet hand-rail with tassels?

These were the questions that racked her soul, and, sympathetically, mine.

Then the name. Laura declared that the name was perhaps the most important factor after all. A name that could stand alone at the top of one's letter paper, without the support of a street number, was indeed an achievement. But, strangely enough, such a name proved to be a very expensive proposition, and Laura put it aside with a resigned sigh.

Who does name the things, anyway? Not the man who invents the names of the Pullman cars, for they are of quite a different sort.

Well, it all made conversation, if nothing more.

"I wish you would express a preference, Otis," Laura would say, and then I would obligingly do so, being careful to prefer the one I knew was not her choice. I did this from the kindest of motives,

in order to give the dear girl the opportunity which I knew she wanted, to argue against my selection, and in favor of her own.

Then I ended by being persuaded to her way of thinking, and that settled the matter for that time.

"Of course," she would say, "if you're never going to marry, but always live with me, you ought to have some say in the selection of our home."

"I don't expect to marry," I returned; "that is, I have no intention of such a thing at present. But you never can tell. The only reason I'm not married is because I've never seen the woman I wanted to make my wife. But I may yet do so. I rather fancy that if I ever fall in love, it will be at first sight, and very desperately. Then I shall marry, and hunt an apartment of my own."

"H'm," said my sister, "you seem to have a sublime assurance that the lady will accept you at first sight."

"If she doesn't, I have confidence in my powers of persuasion. But as I haven't seen her yet, you may as well go ahead with your plans for the continuation of the happy and comfortable home you make for me."

Whereupon she patted me on the shoulder, and remarked that I was a dear old goose, and that some young woman was missing the chance of her life in not acquiring me for a husband!

At last Laura decided, regarding our home, that location was the thing after all, and she gave up much in the way of red velvet and buttons, for the sake of living on one of the blocks sanctioned by those who know.

She decided on the Hammersleigh; in the early sixties, and not too far from the river.

Though not large, the Hammersleigh was one of the most attractive of the moderate-priced apartment houses in New York City. It had a dignified, almost an imposing entrance, and though the hall porter was elevator boy as well, the service was rarely complained of.

Of course dwellers in an apartment house are not supposed to know their fellow-tenants on the same floor, any more than occupants of a brown-stone front are supposed to be acquainted with their next-door neighbors. But even so, I couldn't help feeling an interest which almost amounted to curiosity concerning the young lady who lived in the apartment across the hall from our own in the Hammersleigh.

I had seen her only at a few chance meetings in the elevator or in the entrance hall, and in certain respects her demeanor was peculiar.

Of course I knew the young lady's name. She was Miss Janet Pembroke, and she lived with an old uncle whom I had never seen. Although we had been in the Hammersleigh but two weeks, Laura had learned a few facts concerning the old gentleman. It seems he was Miss Pembroke's great-uncle, and, although very wealthy, was of a miserly disposition and a fierce temper. He was an invalid of some sort, and never left the apartment; but it was said that his ugly disposition and tyrannical ways made his niece's life a burden to her. Indeed, I myself, as I passed their door, often heard the old ogre's voice raised in tones of vituperation and abuse; and my sister declared that she was not surprised that the previous tenants had vacated our apartment, for the old man's shrill voice sometimes even penetrated the thick walls. However, Laura, too, felt an interest in Miss Pembroke, and hoped that after a time she might make her acquaintance.

The girl was perhaps twenty-one or twenty-two, of a brunette type, and, though slender, was not at all fragile-looking. Her large, dark eyes had a pathetic expression, but except for this her appearance was haughty, proud, and exceedingly reserved. She had never so much as glanced at Mrs. Mulford or myself with the least hint of personal interest. To be sure, I had no reason to expect such a thing, but the truth is, I felt sorry for the girl, who must certainly lead a hard life with that dreadful old man.

Laura informed me that there was no one else in the Pembroke household except one servant, a young colored woman.

I had seen Miss Pembroke perhaps not more than a half-dozen times, and I had already observed this: if I chanced to see her as she came out of her own door or descended in the elevator, she was apparently nervously excited. Her cheeks were flushed and her expression was one of utter exasperation, as if she had been tried almost beyond endurance. If, on the other hand, I saw her as she was returning from a walk or an errand, her face was calm and serene – not smiling, but with a patient, resigned look, as of one who had her emotions under control. At either time she was beautiful. Indeed, I scarcely know which aspect seemed to me more attractive: the quivering glow of righteous indignation or the brave calm of enforced cheerfulness.

Nor had I any right to consider her attractive in either case. It is not for a man to think too personally about a woman he has never met.

But I had never before seen a face that so plainly, yet so unconsciously, showed passing emotions, and it fascinated me.

Aside from Miss Pembroke's beauty, she must be, I decided, possessed of great strength of character and great depth of feeling.

But beyond all doubt the girl was not happy, and though this was not my affair, it vaguely troubled me.

I admitted to myself, I even admitted to Laura, that I felt compassion for this young woman who seemed to be so ill-treated; but my sister advised me not to waste my sympathy too easily, for it was her opinion that the young woman was quite capable of taking care of herself, and that in all probability she held her own against her poor old uncle.

"I don't see why you assume a poor old uncle," I said, "when you know how he berates her."

"Yes, but how do I know what she may do to deserve it? Those dark eyes show a smouldering fire that seems to me quite capable of breaking into flame. I rather fancy Miss Pembroke can hold her own against any verbal onslaught of her uncle."

"Then I'm glad she can," I declared; "as she has to stand such unjust tyranny, I hope she has sufficient self-assertion to resent it. I'd rather like to see that girl in a towering rage; she must look stunning!"

"Otis," said my sister, smiling, "you're becoming altogether too deeply interested in Miss Pembroke's appearance. She is a good-looking girl, but not at all the kind we want to know."

"And why not, pray?" I inquired, suddenly irritated at my sister's tone. "I think she is quite of our own class."

"Oh, gracious, yes! I didn't mean that. But she is so haughty and moody, and I'm sure she's of a most intractable disposition. Otis, that girl is deceitful, take my word for it. I've seen her oftener than you have, and I've heard her talk."

"You have! Where?"

"Oh, just a few words now and then – in the elevator perhaps; and one day she was talking to the agent who lives on the first floor of the apartment. *Tumultuous* is the only word to describe her."

"H'm; she must be of a tumultuous nature if she can't control it when talking to an elevator boy or a house agent."

"Oh, I don't mean she was then; but she gave me the impression of a desperate nature, held in check by a strong will."

"Sounds interesting," I said, smiling at my sister's vehemence.

"But that's just what I don't want!" declared Laura, emphatically. "You're not to get interested in that Pembroke girl; I won't have it! If you're going to fall in love at first sight, it must be with some one more gentle and more pleasing of demeanor than our mysterious neighbor."

"But you see, I've already had my first sight of Miss Pembroke, and so – " I looked at my sister, teasingly.

"And you've already fallen in love? Oh, don't tell me that!"

"Nonsense! Of course I haven't done anything of the sort! I've seen Miss Pembroke two or three times. I admire her beauty, and I can't help thinking that she is terribly treated by that cruel uncle. She may be a termagant herself – I've no means of knowing – but as a casual observer my sympathies are with her, and I can't help feeling hard toward the old man."

"You take a perfectly ridiculous attitude," Laura responded. "Like all men you are bewitched by a pair of big dark eyes and a pathetic mouth. I tell you, in all probability that poor old man is more entitled to sympathy than that melodramatic-looking girl!"

As I have said, I always humor Laura, even in her opinions; so I only responded: "Very likely you are right, my dear," and let the subject drop. I'm a lawyer, and I'm thirty-two years old, both of which conditions have led me to the conclusion that in dealing with women acquiescence in unimportant matters is always expedient.

But we were destined to become intimately acquainted with the Pembroke household, and to have opportunities to judge for ourselves whether Miss Janet deserved our sympathy or not.

The hall boy usually brought the first morning mail to our door at about eight o'clock, and when he rang the bell it was my habit to open the door and take the letters from him myself.

One morning I did this, as usual, and stood a moment looking carelessly over the letters before I closed the door. I may as well own up that I did this partly in the hope that Miss Pembroke would appear at the opposite door, where the boy was already ringing the bell. But my hope was unfulfilled, for, with a little click, the door was pulled open, then suddenly stopped with a sharp snap by reason of a night-chain.

"Laws!" exclaimed what was unmistakably a negro girl's vice, "I nebber can 'member dat chain!"

The door was clicked shut again, and I could hear the chain slid back and released; then the door opened and the grinning face of the colored girl appeared, and the boy gave her the letters. As there was no further hope of catching a glimpse of Miss Pembroke, I went back to my breakfast.

II
THE TRAGEDY

It was perhaps half an hour later when I again opened my front door, to start for my downtown office. Laura accompanied me into the hall, as she often does and chattered a few parting inanities as we stood by the elevator. The car was rising, and as we are only on the third floor I had a half-formed intention of walking down the stairs, when the door of the other apartment flew open and Miss Pembroke ran out to meet the elevator. She was greatly excited, but not with anger, for her face was white and her eyes looked big and frightened.

Surely the word *tumultuous* applied to the girl now. But, it was plain to be seen that whatever caused her excitement it was something of importance. She had received a shock of some kind, and though she had herself well in hand, yet she was fairly trembling with almost uncontrollable emotion. She paid not the slightest attention to Laura or me, but clutched at the coat of an elderly gentleman who stepped out of the elevator.

"Oh, Doctor Masterson," she cried, "come in quickly, and see what is the matter with Uncle Robert! He looks so strange, and I'm afraid he's – "

She seemed suddenly to realize our presence, or perhaps she noticed the staring face of the elevator boy, for she left unfinished whatever she had been about to say, and, still clutching the doctor's coat, urged him toward her own door.

I did not presume to speak to Miss Pembroke, but I could not resist an impulse that made me say to the doctor: "If I can be of any assistance, pray call upon me."

There was no time for response – I was not even sure that the doctor heard me – but I turned back with Laura into our own apartment.

"Something has happened," I said to her, "and I think I'll wait a bit."

"Do," said my sister. "It may be that we can be of assistance to that poor girl; for if her uncle has a serious attack of any kind she will certainly want help."

I looked at Laura with admiring affection, for I saw at once that she had realized that Miss Pembroke was in serious trouble of some sort, and her true womanly heart went out to the girl, forgetting entirely her previous dislike and suspicion.

Almost immediately our door-bell rang, and, feeling sure that it was a summons in response to my offer, I opened the door myself.

Sure enough, there stood the elderly doctor, looking very much perturbed.

"You kindly offered your assistance, sir," he said, "or I should not intrude. I want immediate help. Mr. Pembroke is dead, Miss Pembroke has fainted, and their servant is so nearly in hysterics that she is of no use whatever."

Laura is always splendid in an emergency, so of course she rose to the occasion at once.

"Let me go to Miss Pembroke," she said, in her quiet, capable way. "I'm Mrs. Mulford, and this is my brother, Otis Landon. We are new-comers here, and do not know Miss Pembroke personally, but we are only too glad to do anything we can for her."

"Thank you," said the old gentleman, looking at Laura with an air of approval. "I'm Doctor Masterson, the Pembroke's family physician. I'm greatly surprised at this sudden death. I'm surprised, too, that Janet should faint away, for I have never known her to do such a thing before."

By this time we had all three crossed the hall, and were inside the Pembrokes' door, which opened into a short cross hall. On the right was the drawing-room, and here we found Miss Pembroke, who had not yet regained consciousness. She lay on a couch, and as the doctor bent over her she gave a convulsive shudder, but did not open her eyes.

"She'll be all right in a moment," said Doctor Masterson. "Janet is a plucky girl, and sound as a nut. I'll leave her in your care, Mrs. Mulford."

Laura was already hovering over the girl, and, with her intuitive womanliness, was doing exactly the right things.

The colored woman was crouched in a heap on the floor, and was rocking herself back and forth, with occasional wails.

"Stop that noise, Charlotte," commanded the doctor. "Don't make us any more trouble than we already have."

The command was not heeded, but without further comment he turned away from her, and as he beckoned to me I followed him from the room.

"I was at my wits' end," he exclaimed, "with those two women on my hands, and this dead man to look after!" As he spoke, we crossed the short hall and entered what was apparently the old gentleman's bedroom. I gazed with interest at the face of Robert Pembroke, and, save for what Doctor Masterson had told me, I should have thought I was looking at the face of a sleeping man. My first feeling was one of admiration, for the features were of classic mould, and the white hair, thick and rather long, waved back from a noble brow.

"What a handsome man!" I exclaimed involuntarily.

"Did you know him?" asked Doctor Masterson, looking at me keenly.

"No," I replied; "I've never seen him before. I've lived in this house but two weeks."

"Robert Pembroke was a handsome man," agreed the doctor, "but, with the best intentions, and with all the respect due the dead, there is little else good to be said of him. But his sudden death puzzles me greatly. I have been his physician for many years, and I should have said that he had not the least apoplectic tendency. Yet apoplexy must have caused his death – at least, so far as I can judge without a more thorough examination."

As he spoke Doctor Masterson was examining the body, and his look of bewilderment increased.

"He looks as if he were asleep," I said.

"That's just it," said the doctor. "There is no indication of a convulsive struggle or a spasm of any kind. His limbs are quietly composed, even relaxed, as if he had died in his sleep; which is not quite indicative of a stroke of apoplexy."

"Heart disease?" I suggested.

"He had no valvular trouble of the heart," said the doctor, who was continuing his examination. "He had gout, indigestion, rheumatism, and many ailments incidental to old age, but nothing organic, and I had supposed he would live many years longer to torment that poor girl in there."

"He was irascible, I know," I responded, feeling that I ought to say something.

"Irascible faintly expresses it," declared the Doctor, in a low voice; "he was cruel, domineering, tyrannical and of a brutal temper."

"And he vented it on innocent Miss Pembroke?"

"Yes; he did, though Janet is no patient Griselda. She can hold her own! I've known her to – "

Doctor Masterson ceased talking as he went on with his investigation.

A dozen questions rose to my lips, but I refrained from uttering them. Miss Pembroke's affairs were none of my business; and, too, the doctor was not definitely addressing me, but seemed rather to be talking to himself.

"Here's a key," he said, holding toward me a small bright key; "just take it for the moment, Mr. Landon, as it is doubtless an important one."

"Where was it?" I asked.

"On the bed, by Mr. Pembroke's side. It had probably been under his pillow. It looks like the key of a safety box of some sort."

I put the key in my pocket, with a pleased thought that it would give me an opportunity to speak with Miss Pembroke. Meantime I noticed that Doctor Masterson's attitude was becoming more and more that of a greatly perplexed man.

"I don't understand it," he muttered. "A man can't die without a cause. And every known cause shows its own symptom. But I find no symptoms. What can this man have died of?"

"No foul play, I hope," I observed.

"No, no; nothing of that sort! Mr. Pembroke died peacefully in his sleep. But how?"

Suddenly he straightened himself up with an air of resolve.

"Is there a doctor living in this house?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered; "there is one on the first floor. Shall I fetch him?"

"Do," said the old man. "Tell him that Doctor Masterson wishes to call him in consultation on a serious matter." I hastened on my errand, though not so rapidly as not to pause a moment to glance in at Miss Pembroke, who had recovered consciousness, and was lying quietly back on the sofa pillows, while Laura bathed her forehead with cologne. I well knew the soothing capabilities of Laura's finger-tips; and I also was not surprised to notice that the black girl had ceased her convulsive shuddering, and, though still sitting on the floor, was gazing at Laura as if fascinated.

All this I took in in a brief glance, and then ran hurriedly down the stairs in search of Doctor Post.

"Is this Doctor Post?" I asked as I entered his office.

"Yes," he replied, laying down the gloves and hat he held. Apparently, he was just about to go out, and I had fortunately arrived in time.

"Will you go up-stairs with me?" I went on. "Mr. Pembroke, on the third floor, is dead; and his physician, Doctor Masterson, is at a loss to discover the cause of his death. He sent me to ask you to join him in consultation."

"Doctor Masterson!" exclaimed Doctor Post, and I saw at once that the younger man was flattered at being called in consultation by the older and celebrated practitioner. "He wants me?" he asked, as if scarcely able to believe it.

"Yes; it is a peculiar case, and he asks your help. Will you go with me at once?"

"Certainly," and in another moment Doctor Post and I were in the elevator.

"Old Mr. Pembroke dead?" asked the boy as we entered.

"Yes," I answered briefly.

"Gee, is he? Well, *I* can't give him any weeps! He was sumpin fierce! He just put it all over that young loidy. Sometimes she'd come down in this elevator all to the teary, so's I 'most hadta order a consignment of weep-catchers for myself. She's a looker all right, and she sets off the house great, but she leads the dismal swamp life, an' that's right!"

I had neither time nor inclination then to reprove the boy for thus crudely expressing his opinion, for we had reached the third floor, and Doctor Post and I went at once to Robert Pembroke's bedroom.

I introduced the new-comer to his older colleague, and then turned aside while they consulted on the problem that faced them.

I was surprised that a physician of Doctor Masterson's age and experience should find it necessary to call the younger man to his aid, but as I knew little of medical men and their ways, I had no definite opinion on the subject. I felt a slight embarrassment as to my own presence in the room, but I also felt a hesitancy about returning to the drawing-room until the doctors should have reached a decision. I endeavored not to hear the low words they were speaking, but I couldn't help gathering that there was an element of mystery in Robert Pembroke's death. In order not to appear curious, I walked about the room, and idly noted its furnishings. Though not over-ornate, the appointments were comfortable and even luxurious. A great easy-chair stood by the window, which opened on an inner court, and which was in fact directly opposite the window of my own bedroom in our duplicate apartment. Near by stood a desk, open, and with its contents tidily arranged. The position of ink-stand,

pen-racks and stationery proved the old gentleman to have been of methodical habits and orderly tastes. My lawyer's brain immediately darted to the conclusion that Robert Pembroke's sudden death had found him with his affairs all in order, and that his heirs, whoever they might be, would doubtless have no trouble in adjusting his estate. The dressing bureau and chiffonier presented just such an appearance as one would expect to see in the room of an elderly gentleman. While there were no fancy knick-knacks, there was a multitude of ebony-backed brushes and other toilet appurtenances. Moreover there were several bits of really good bric-a-brac, two or three bronzes, a carved silver box and some antique curios, that were evidently valuable.

Mr. Pembroke may have been quick-tempered and cruel-natured, but he rose in my opinion as I noticed the good taste displayed in the furnishing of the room. However, this might be due to Miss Pembroke's housekeeping, and it somehow pleased me to fancy that it was.

Two scraps of paper or cardboard lay on the floor near the foot of the bed. Obeying my instinct for tidiness, and really without thinking of what I was doing, I picked them up and threw them into the waste basket. As I did so, I noticed they were stubs of theater tickets. I felt a momentary surprise at this, for I had been told that Mr. Pembroke never went out of the house. However, it was quite within the possibilities that the stubs represented Miss Pembroke's attendance at the theatre, or might even have been dropped there by some caller. These matters took no definite shape in my mind, but were mere drifting thoughts, when I heard Doctor Masterson say:

"Excuse me, Mr. Landon, but may I ask you to leave Doctor Post and me by ourselves for a few moments? This affair is assuming a very serious side, and it is necessary that a professional secrecy be observed, at least for the moment."

"Certainly," I replied, greatly awed by the apprehension clearly evident on the Doctor's kindly old face. "I have no wish but to be of service in any way I may, and I'm completely at your orders."

"Thank you, Mr. Landon," returned Doctor Masterson, courteously, "I will tell you that we have to deal with a very grave situation, but I will ask you to say nothing to the people in the other room concerning it."

III
JANET PEMBROKE

Leaving the two doctors to their consultation I went back into the drawing-room.

Although this room was the duplicate of our own living-room in the apartment across the hall, it presented quite a different appearance because of its richer furnishings. The simple tastes of my sister and myself did not incline us to velvet hangings and heavily upholstered furniture. Our whole room was lighter in effect, but the Pembroke drawing-room, while harmonious in coloring and design, was almost oppressive in its multitude of appointments. Tall pedestals supported large pieces of Chinese bronze. Embroidered screens made a background for high, carved chairs and inlaid tabourets. The rugs were antique and thick, the curtains conventionally draped and the pictures on the walls were paintings of value.

I instinctively felt that all of this reflected the old uncle's taste, rather than that of Miss Pembroke, for, though I had not seen her often, her general appearance had a note of modernity quite different from the atmosphere of her home.

I glanced at the girl as she sat beside Laura on the sofa. Though not a connoisseur in women's clothes, I am yet not so absurdly ignorant as many men are. Miss Pembroke wore a simple house dress of soft material and of an old rose color. There was a big black satin bow effectively attached somewhere – I can't describe its location, but it had broad streamers that fell gracefully to the floor. The simply cut garment and the soft dull color suited the girl's pale white complexion and dark hair. She was doubtless of an unusual pallor that morning, which made the thick curls clustering round her brow, and the big brown eyes seem even darker than usual.

It was late in October and a lighted gas log gave a comfortable warmth to the room.

Miss Pembroke seemed to be quite herself again, though still somewhat dazed, apparently, by what had happened. She showed no inclination to talk, but her manner was quiet and composed as she asked me to be seated. I had no wish to intrude, but I thought there might be other ways in which I could serve her, so I sat down and waited. There was an indescribable something in her manner, or rather in her appearance, that puzzled me.

I had thought her beautiful before, but in this time of sorrowful emergency there was a mysterious expression on her face that gave her an added charm. She was not pathetic or appealing in effect, but seemed to be possessed of an energy and excitement which she determinedly suppressed. She showed no sign of grief at her uncle's death, but her calmness and self-control were unmistakably the result of a strong will power. Had she been broken-hearted, but for some reason determined that no one should know it, she would have acted this same way; but it also seemed to me that had she felt a secret sense of relief, even almost of gladness, at being released from the old man's tyranny, she must have acted much the same.

Occasionally her composure was broken by a sudden, quick gesture or an abrupt, impulsive remark.

"Charlotte," she said suddenly, "why do you stay here? You may as well go to the kitchen and go on with your work."

The black girl rolled her eyes apprehensively toward Mr. Pembroke's room, as if a superstitious dread made her hesitate.

"I don't like to go off my myse'f alone, Miss Janet," she said.

"But you must, Charlotte," said Miss Pembroke nervously, but not unkindly; "you must go and clear away the breakfast things."

"But yo' haven't had yo' breakfast, Miss Janet, honey."

"Never mind, Charlotte; I can't eat any breakfast. Clear it all away. I don't want anything."

I was much impressed with the tense, drawn expression of the speaker's face, and the quick, sharp accents of her voice, as if she had almost reached the limit of her self-control.

Here Laura interposed: "I'm sure, Miss Pembroke, you would feel better able to meet the day if you would eat something. Charlotte, if you will bring just a cup of coffee and a roll on a tray, I think Miss Pembroke will take some of it."

"Yas'm," said Charlotte, and, falling, as nearly every one did, into the way of obeying Laura's suggestions, she went away.

I endeavored to keep up the conversation by casual and unimportant remarks, and Laura ably assisted me, by responding to my observations. But though Miss Pembroke tried to join the conversation, it was impossible for her, and, as I had feared, her tense self-control gave way and she suddenly broke down in a fit of hysterical sobbing.

Laura tried to soothe her, but had sense enough not to try to stop her crying. She let the nervous and overwrought girl give way to her tears which of themselves brought relief.

"I didn't love him!" she exclaimed, her voice broken by sobs, "and that's why I feel so bad. I tried to love him, but he wouldn't let me. I honestly tried – don't you believe I did?"

She grasped Laura's hands as she spoke, and looked into her eyes.

"Of course I believe it," replied Laura, heartily; "don't think about that now, Miss Pembroke. I'm sure you have nothing to reproach yourself for."

"Oh, yes, I have. I'm a wicked girl! I ought to have been more patient with Uncle Robert. But he was so old and so cruel. He was my mother's uncle, you know, and he took me on sufferance – because he couldn't help himself – and he never let me forget it. He told me a dozen times a day that I was dependent on him for the bread I ate. And last evening we had a most awful quarrel! One of our very worst. Oh, I can't bear to remember it!"

"Don't remember it, dear," said Laura, with her arm still around the quivering body of the girl; "don't think of it."

"Think of it! I can never forget it. You see, he was determined that I should – "

Apparently Miss Pembroke had been about to make a confidant of Laura, when she suddenly remembered my presence. She straightened up with a start, and seemed to recover not only her poise, but the hauteur which I had so often observed in her demeanor.

It was a relief to the situation when at that moment Charlotte, the maid, returned with a daintily-appointed breakfast tray.

It was quite evident that the colored girl adored her young mistress. She hovered about her, arranging the tray on a small table at her side and looked at Miss Pembroke with an air of loving concern.

"Do try and eat sumpin, Miss Janet, honey; do, now."

"Thank you, Charlotte," and Miss Pembroke looked kindly at the girl; "I will try."

With a little nod, she tacitly dismissed the maid, but Charlotte lingered. After a moment of hesitation, she volunteered a suggestion, which was evidently weighing on her mind.

"Miss Janet, honey," she said, slowly, "ain' yo' gwine send fo' Master George?"

"George!" exclaimed Janet Pembroke. "Why, how strange I hadn't thought of it! Of course we must send for George. I'll telephone at once. You may go, Charlotte."

Again Charlotte left the room, and Miss Pembroke turned to Laura to explain.

"George," she said, "is George Lawrence, my cousin. He is my only relative except – Uncle Robert. He used to live with us, but a few months ago he moved to bachelor apartments farther downtown. If you will excuse me, I will telephone for him."

The telephone was in a small adjoining room, which was really rather a large alcove off the drawing-room. This was apparently a sort of music-room here, while my corresponding alcove – for the apartment was, of course, a duplicate of our own – I used as my smoking-room.

I heard Miss Pembroke, in a calm, clear voice, call up her cousin and ask him to come at once. She did not tell him what had happened. Then she hung up the receiver and returned to where we sat.

"I don't see why I didn't think of George sooner," she said. "I ought to have sent for him the very first thing."

"You were so dazed," I suggested, "that what would ordinarily be the most natural thing to do did not occur to you."

"Yes," she said, catching at my suggestion almost eagerly – "yes, that must have been it. I was dazed, wasn't I?"

"Indeed you were," said Laura soothingly. "You fainted quite away."

"Oh, yes," returned the girl; "that was when Doctor Masterson told me that Uncle Robert was dead. It was such a shock. I couldn't believe it, you know. Why, I never faint! I'm not that sort."

"Even so," said Laura, "the sudden shock was quite enough to cause you to faint."

The girl looked at her almost wistfully. "Yes, it *was* enough, wasn't it?" she said; "a shock like that would make anybody faint, wouldn't it? I just couldn't believe it. We – we never dreamed he would die suddenly. I wonder what George will say?"

"Is there any one else that you would like to have notified?" I asked.

"No," she said. "I have no other relatives at all. Of course we must tell Milly Waring, but I'll wait until after I see George."

"But aside from relatives, Miss Pembroke," I said, "is there no one else who ought to be notified? Ought you not to advise your uncle's lawyer?"

I was all unprepared for the effect this casual suggestion had upon the girl. Although she had recovered her composure almost entirely, it now seemed to desert her again. But instead of weeping her emotion was of a different nature; she seemed intensely angry. A red spot appeared in either pale cheek, and her dark eyes flashed fire. Her voice quivered when she spoke, but it sounded like the accents of suppressed rage.

"Uncle Robert's lawyer!" she exclaimed, in a tone of scorn; "he's the last person I want to send for!"

The words of themselves were astonishing, but not nearly so much so as the scathing inflection with which they were uttered.

"Then we won't send for him," said Laura, in her soothing way. "You shan't be troubled just now."

Laura looked at me with a glance of deep reproach, which was, to say the least, unjust; for, as a lawyer, it seemed to me I had made a most rational suggestion. Moreover, my sister's change of base somewhat surprised me. She it had been who denounced Miss Pembroke as being deceitful, melodramatic and untrustworthy! Now, she was not only befriending the girl as only one woman can befriend another, but she was resenting a most common-sense suggestion on my part.

But I was destined to learn that Janet Pembroke always did the unexpected.

As suddenly as it had come, her flash of anger left her, and with a quiet, almost expressionless face, she turned to me, and said: "You are quite right, Mr. Landon. I am sure it is a case where my uncle's lawyer should be called in. He is Mr. Leroy – Graham Leroy – and I suppose I ought to tell him at once about my uncle."

"You don't like Mr. Leroy?" I said, impulsively. Had I paused to think, I should not have spoken thus personally. But Miss Pembroke answered simply:

"No, I do not like Mr. Graham Leroy. But that does not make any difference. He has full charge of my uncle's financial affairs; and, too, he has long been his personal friend and adviser. So, I know it is right to send for him."

She sighed, as if her decision were entirely because of what she considered her duty.

It was absurd of me, to be sure, but I am always given to jumping at conclusions, and it flashed across me that Graham Leroy's interest in the Pembroke family extended farther than his professional

relations with the old gentleman. I know him slightly, as a brother lawyer, and I knew that from a feminine point of view he was a most fascinating man. He was a bachelor, and though not young, was handsome, brilliant and exceedingly distinguished in effect. Moreover, flattering myself that I understood the contrariness of a woman's assertions in such matters, my mind leaped to the conviction that because Miss Pembroke had denounced him, she was in all probability in love with him.

And then I sternly inquired of myself how it could possibly matter to me if she were.

But this stern and questioning attitude of myself to myself did not deceive me in the least. I knew perfectly well that I was already sufficiently interested in Janet Pembroke to resent the introduction of such a dangerous factor as Graham Leroy into the case. Being a lawyer, the absurdity of my own mental attitude was perfectly clear to me, but being a man, I didn't care if it was. Of course, my sentiments toward her were nothing more than admiration for her beauty and sympathy for her sorrow. If these were augmented by the elusive mystery that seemed to enwrap her, that was an argument in justification of my sudden interest in a comparative stranger.

"Will you, Otis?" Laura was saying, and I collected my scattered wits with a start, as I said, "will I what?"

"Will you telephone to Mr. Leroy?" she said, a little impatiently, and I knew she was repeating her question.

"Of course," I said, jumping up and looking for the telephone book.

"His number is on the card by the telephone," said Miss Pembroke, and in a few moments I had Leroy's call. But he was not in his office, so leaving word for him to come as soon as possible, I hung up the receiver.

IV
DOCTOR POST'S DISCOVERY

A few moments after this, Mr. George Lawrence arrived. He let himself in at the front door with a latch-key, and walked into the room with the air of one familiar with the place.

"Well, Janet, what's up?" he began, and then, seeing strangers, paused expectantly.

"Mrs. Mulford," said Janet, "this is my cousin, Mr. Lawrence. Mr. Landon, Mr. Lawrence."

The new-comer bowed politely and with the graceful courtesy of a well-bred city man, then turned again to his cousin.

"I sent for you, George," began Janet, "because – because – "

But here her self-possession failed her, and she could go no further. She cast an appealing glance at me, as if to ask me to speak for her, then threw herself on the couch in an uncontrollable fit of weeping.

Laura sat beside the sobbing girl, while Mr. Lawrence turned to me for an explanation.

Judging at first sight that with a man of his type a straightforward statement would be the best, I told him in as few words as possible what had happened.

"Uncle Robert dead!" he exclaimed. "Why, what does it mean? He had no heart trouble that we knew of. Was it apoplexy?"

"I think so," I replied. "Two doctors are in there now, holding a consultation."

"Two doctors?" exclaimed Mr. Lawrence. "Who are they?"

"Doctor Masterson, who was, I believe, your late uncle's physician, and Doctor Post, who lives in this house."

"Which came first?" asked Mr. Lawrence.

By this time Miss Pembroke, who seemed to be subject to sudden changes of demeanor, took it upon herself to answer his question. She had stopped crying, and again showed that icy calmness which I could not yet understand.

"I sent for Doctor Masterson," she said. "I thought uncle was only ill, but when the doctor came he said he was dead; and then he wanted another doctor, so Mr. Landon very kindly went for Doctor Post."

"Why did he want Doctor Post, if Uncle Robert was already dead?" demanded Lawrence.

"To help him to discover what caused uncle's death."

"Then we must await the result of their consultation," he replied. He seemed about to say something else, but checked himself. I could readily understand why he should hesitate to say in the presence of strangers many things that he might have said to his cousin had they been alone.

I felt attracted to this young man. Although he had a careless, good-natured air, there seemed to be an underlying vein of kindly feeling and courteous solicitude. Like Miss Pembroke, he seemed to be controlling his emotion and forcing himself to meet the situation calmly.

George Lawrence was large-framed and heavily-built, while Janet Pembroke was a lithe and willowy slip of a girl; but their features showed a degree of family likeness, and the dark eyes and dark, curling hair were decidedly similar. They seemed congenial, and thoroughly good comrades. Miss Pembroke appeared glad that her cousin had arrived, and he seemed desirous of doing whatever he could to help her. I was struck by the utter absence of any expressions of grief on the part of either, and then I remembered what I had heard about the cruel temper of their uncle. Could it be possible, I thought, that these two were really glad rather than otherwise? Then I remembered Miss Pembroke's piteous weeping, and as I looked at Mr. Lawrence and noted his white face and clenched hands I concluded that they were both controlling their real feelings, and exhibiting only what they considered a proper attitude before strangers.

Then I began to think that since Miss Pembroke's cousin was with her, perhaps Laura and I ought to go away and leave them to themselves. I made a remark to this effect, but, to my surprise, both Miss Pembroke and her cousin insisted that we should stay, at least until the doctors had finished their consultation.

So we stayed, and Laura, with her usual tact, managed to keep up a desultory conversation on various unimportant subjects.

Occasionally the talk became more or less personal, and I learned that George Lawrence had previously lived with his uncle and cousin in this same apartment. It also transpired – though this, I think, was told unintentionally – that the reason why he went away to live by himself was because he could no longer stand the unpleasantness caused by the fierce fits of anger into which old Mr. Pembroke would fly upon the slightest provocation.

"It does seem a pity," he said, "that such a really fine man should be so utterly unable to control his temper. I could stand an ordinary amount of grumbling and fault-finding, but Uncle Robert in his rages was almost insane. He grew worse as he grew older. Janet and I lived with him for many years, and each year he grew more unbearable. I suppose, poor old chap, it was his gout that made him so crusty and cross, but it kept me in hot water so much of the time that I couldn't stand it. Janet stood it better than I did, but she's a born angel anyhow."

Mr. Lawrence looked admiringly at his cousin, who acknowledged his compliment with a faint smile.

"I didn't stand it very well," she said; "but I'm sorry now that I wasn't more patient. Poor old uncle, he didn't have a very happy life."

"Well, you can't blame yourself for that. You did everything in your power to make it pleasant for him, and if he wouldn't accept your efforts, you certainly have nothing for which to reproach yourself."

"Yes, I have," she declared; "we had an awful quarrel last night, and when Uncle left me he was very angry. I hate to think of our last interview."

"The usual subject, I suppose," said young Lawrence, looking sympathetically at his cousin; "have you sent for Leroy?"

This question confirmed my fears. Mr. Lawrence had certainly implied by association of ideas, that Miss Pembroke's quarrel with her uncle the night before had had to do with Graham Leroy in some way. This might refer only to financial matters. But my jealous apprehension made me suspect a more personal side to the story.

She answered that she had sent a message to Leroy, and then again, without a moment's warning, Miss Pembroke burst into one of those convulsive fits of sobbing. I was glad Laura was still there, for she seemed able to soothe the girl as I'm sure no one else could have done.

His cousin's grief seemed to affect George Lawrence deeply, but again he endeavored to suppress any exhibition of emotion. His white face grew whiter, and he clinched his hands until the knuckles stood out like knots, but he spoke no word of sympathy or comfort.

I felt myself slightly at a loss in the presence of his repressed feeling, and as I did not think myself sufficiently acquainted with him to offer any word of sympathy, I said nothing.

It was into this somewhat difficult situation that the two doctors came. They looked exceedingly grave; indeed, their faces bore an expression of awe that seemed even beyond what the case demanded.

"Ah, George," said Doctor Masterson, grasping the hand of the young man, "I'm glad you're here. Did Janet send for you?"

"Yes, doctor; she telephoned, and I came at once. I'm indeed surprised and shocked at Uncle Robert's sudden death. Had you ever thought such a thing likely to happen?"

"No," said Doctor Masterson, and his voice had a peculiar ring, as of a man proving his own opinion.

Apparently Janet Pembroke was accustomed to the inflections of the old doctor's voice, for she looked suddenly up at him, as if he had said something more. Her crying spell was over, for the time at least, and her white face had again assumed its haughty and inscrutable expression.

"Was it heart disease?" she inquired, looking straight at Doctor Masterson.

"No," he replied; "it was not. Nor was it apoplexy, nor disease of any sort. Mr. Robert Pembroke did not die a natural death; he was killed while he slept."

I suppose to a man of Doctor Masterson's brusk, curt manner it was natural to announce this fact so baldly; but it seemed to me nothing short of brutality to fling the statement in the face of that quivering, shrinking girl.

"Killed!" she said, clasping her hands tightly. "Murdered!"

"Yes," said the doctor; "murdered in a peculiar fashion, and by a means of devilish ingenuity. Indeed, I must confess that had it not been for Doctor Post's conviction that the death was not natural, and his determination to discover the cause, it might never have been found out."

"Was he shot?" asked Janet, and it seemed to me she spoke like one in a trance.

"Shot? No!" said Doctor Masterson. "He was stabbed, or rather *pierced*, with a long, thin pin – a hat-pin, you know. Stabbed in the back of his neck, at the base of the brain, as he lay asleep. He never knew it. The pin broke off in the wound, and death was immediate, caused by cerebral hemorrhage. Doctor Post and I have made a most thorough examination, and we are convinced that these are the facts. Mr. Pembroke was lying on his side, in a most natural position, and was, in all probability, sleeping soundly. This gave the murderer an excellent opportunity to aim the deadly pin with careful precision, and to pierce the brain with a swift stab. The result of this was precisely the same as a sudden and fatal apoplectic stroke. Though there may have been a tremor or slight quiver of certain muscles, there was no convulsion or contortion, and Mr. Pembroke's face still retains the placid look of sleep. Death must have taken place, we conclude, at or near midnight."

We who heard this sat as if paralyzed. It was so unexpected, so fearfully sudden, so appalling, that there seemed to be no words fit to express our feelings.

Then George Lawrence spoke. "Who did it?" he said, and his white face and compressed lips showed the struggle he was making for self-control.

"I don't know," and Doctor Masterson spoke mechanically, as if thinking of something else.

"No, of course, we don't know," broke in Doctor Post, who seemed a bit inclined to emphasize his own importance. And perhaps this was but natural, as the older doctor had plainly stated that but for Doctor Post's insistent investigation they might never have discovered the crime.

"But we must immediately set to work to find out who did this dreadful deed," Doctor Post went on; and though I felt repelled at the avidity he showed, I knew he was right. Though the others seemed partially stunned by the suddenly disclosed fact, I foresaw the dreadful experiences that must follow in its train.

Miss Pembroke, though still sitting by Laura's side, had broken away from her encircling arm. The girl sat upright, her great eyes fixed on Doctor Masterson's face. She showed no visible emotion, but seemed to be striving to realize the situation.

"Murdered!" she breathed in a low whisper; "Uncle Robert murdered!"

Then, without another word, her eyes traveled slowly round the room, resting on each person in turn. Her glance was calm, yet questioning. It almost seemed as if she suspected some one of us to be guilty of the crime. Or was it that she was seeking help and sympathy for herself? If so she could stop with me. She need look no further. I knew that in the near future she would want help, and that of a legal nature. She had herself said, or at least implied, that she would not look for such help from Graham Leroy. If this were true, and not merely a bit of feminine perversity, I vowed to myself that mine should be the helping hand outstretched to her in her hour of need.

"There is much to be done," Doctor Post continued, and his mind was so occupied with the greater facts of the situation, that he almost ignored Miss Pembroke. He addressed himself to Doctor

Masterson, but it was easily seen that this was a mere form, and he himself quite evidently intended to be the real director of affairs. "We must find out who was the intruder, doubtless a professional burglar, who committed this awful deed. We must search the room for clues, and that, too, at once, before time and circumstance may obliterate them."

Although I didn't show it, I couldn't help a slight feeling of amusement at this speech. It was so palpably evident that Doctor Post possessed what he himself would doubtless call the Detective Instinct; and, moreover, it was clearly indicated that his knowledge of the proper methods of procedure were gained from the best detective fiction! Not that he was wrong in his suggestion, but it was not the time, nor was it his place to investigate the hypothetical "clues."

Doctor Masterson appreciated this point, and with a slightly disapproving shake of his wise, old head, he observed: "I think those things are not in our province, Doctor Post. We have performed our duty. We have learned the method and means of Robert Pembroke's death; we have made our report, and our duties are ended. The case has passed out of our hands, and such details as clues and evidence, are in the domain of the coroner and inspector."

Doctor Post looked a little chagrined. But he quickly covered it, and effusively agreed with the older doctor.

"Quite so, quite so," he said; "I was merely suggesting, in what is perhaps an over-zealous desire to be of assistance. What you say, Doctor Masterson, is entirely true. And now," he added, again bristling with an assumption of importance, "and now, we must send for the coroner."

V
SEVERAL CLUES

I had often told Laura that if I ever did fall in love it would be at first sight, and now it had come. Not only Janet Pembroke's beauty and the pathetic appeal of her sorrowful face attracted me, but I was fascinated by the mystery of the girl.

The astounding news that had just been told her was so much worse than the mere fact of her uncle's death, that I fully expected her to show her emotion in desperate hysterics. But instead, it seemed to rouse in her a spirit of courage and self-reliance, and though it was quite evident that she was making a great effort, yet she ably succeeded in controlling herself perfectly.

There was no use blinking the fact; I had fallen in love with Janet Pembroke. And as the truth of the fearful tragedy penetrated her dazed brain, and she seemed so sadly in need of comfort and help my impulse was to go to her, and tell her of my sympathy and regard.

As this was out of the question, I was glad to see Laura sit by the girl's side and soothe her with kindly caresses. But, to my surprise, Janet did not faint, nor did she seem in any danger of physical collapse. On the contrary, Doctor Post's remark seemed to arouse her to action. She sat up very straight, and, though the rest of her face was perfectly white, a red spot glowed in either cheek.

"The coroner?" she said, in a strained, unnatural voice. "What would he do?"

"It is necessary, my child, that he be summoned," said Doctor Masterson, "since your uncle did not die a natural death."

"But what will he do?" persisted Janet.

"He will ask questions of all who know anything about the matter, and try to discover the one who did the awful deed."

"Of course, Janet," observed George Lawrence, "we must call the coroner. It is always done, I believe, in such a case as this."

"Very well," said Janet; "but it is all so dreadful – I can't realize it. Who killed Uncle Robert? Was it a burglar? Did he steal anything?"

She seemed to be talking quite at random. George answered her kindly, and his manner was gentle and affectionate.

"We don't know, Janet dear," he said. "That is what the coroner will inquire into."

I was thankful that my own business did not imperatively demand my presence at my office that day, and I concluded to stay where I was, at any rate, until the coroner arrived.

I would doubtless be called as a witness, and, too, I trusted I could be of help to Janet.

The girl puzzled while she fascinated me. She seemed so helpless and alone, and yet she showed a strange courage – almost bravado.

George Lawrence, too, was reserved and self-contained, and I imagined they both inherited something of their dead uncle's strength of character.

Doctor Masterson had telephoned for the coroner, who said he would come soon and bring an inspector.

Then Laura persuaded Miss Pembroke to go with her across to our own apartment, and rest there for a time. This plan commended itself to Doctor Masterson, and he told Janet not to return until he sent for her.

Doctor Post said he would return to his office, but would come up to the apartment again when called for.

He contrived to have a short talk with me before leaving.

"There's more to this than appears on the surface," he declared, with the air of imparting information of value. "This is a most cold-blooded murder, carefully planned and cleverly carried out. The criminal is no ordinary sneak thief or burglar."

"That may be," I returned, "but if so, it is the coroner's place to discover and punish the murderer. Surely we can do nothing."

"We ought to," urged Doctor Post; "we ought to examine the whole place carefully for clues."

"I confess, Doctor Post," I returned, "that I should be glad to do so. My inclinations, like yours, are toward going to work at once. But we are not in authority, and Doctor Masterson is. It is only courteous to him and to Miss Pembroke to acquiesce in their wishes."

So, reluctantly, Doctor Post went away, and I observed that Doctor Masterson seemed relieved at his departure.

"It's a bad business," said the doctor to young Lawrence. "I can't understand it."

"It's horrible!" exclaimed George Lawrence, covering his face with his hands. "Why, I was here yesterday afternoon, and Uncle Robert was particularly well, and particularly – "

He paused, and with a grim smile Doctor Masterson completed the sentence: "Particularly cantankerous?"

"Yes, sir, he was," said Lawrence candidly. "I think I never saw him in a worse rage, and all about nothing. He stormed at Janet until the poor girl cried, and then he scolded her for that. But I suppose his gout was pretty bad, and that always made him ugly."

"Where do you live now, George?" inquired Doctor Masterson.

"I've bachelor rooms down in Washington Square. Not as comfortable in some ways as I was here, but good enough on the whole. I must make a home for Janet somewhere now. It's all dreadful, to be sure, but, really, she'll be happier without Uncle Robert, in every way."

"She inherits property?" I asked, and, because of Lawrence's confidential manner, my casual question did not seem impertinent.

"She and I are the only heirs," he said straightforwardly. "Uncle Robert's will is no secret. It was made long ago, and as we are his only relatives he left us equal inheritors. I don't care about that part of it, but I'm glad Janet is to have some money of her own. Uncle Robert was mighty close with her. I made money enough for my own needs, but Janet couldn't do that, and she had to scrimp outrageously. She's so proud, she won't accept a cent from me, and between uncle's miserliness and his temper she has led an awful life."

"Then I can't feel real regret that Mr. Pembroke is gone," I said, "except that the manner of his taking off is so horrible. Do you suppose that it is the work of burglars?"

"Must have been," said Lawrence. "I haven't looked around at all – I hate all that sort of thing – but I suppose the coroner will clear up all mystery."

"Now, on the contrary," said I, "I have a liking for detective work, and, if there is any occasion for it, I'll be glad to do anything I can for you."

George Lawrence seemed not to hear me.

"Uncle Robert hadn't an enemy in the world, that I know of," he said musingly; "so it must have been a burglar or marauder of some sort."

"Very unusual method for a burglar," said I, thinking of the hat-pin. "Would you mind if I looked about a little bit? I'd like to find the other end of that pin."

"What pin?" asked Lawrence.

"The pin that killed your uncle. The doctors say it was a hat-pin, broken off close to the flesh."

"A hat-pin? How awful!"

The young man gave a shudder, as if sensitive to gruesome pictures.

"Yes," I went on; "and if we could find the head end that broke off, it might be a clue to the murderer."

"Oh, yes, I see. Well, certainly, go and look about all you choose. But excuse me from that sort of thing. I'll get the best detectives, if necessary, but I can't do anything in that way myself."

I readily understood this attitude in one so closely related to the victim of the dreadful deed, and at his permission I determined to search the whole apartment thoroughly. We had been alone during this conversation, as Doctor Masterson had returned to his late patient's room, and the servant, Charlotte, had not reappeared.

I went directly to Mr. Pembroke's bedroom, but when there, I hesitated for a moment before addressing Doctor Masterson.

And then he spoke first; "I freely confess," he said, "that I owe to Doctor Post the discovery of the truth. I was positive it was not a natural death, but my old eyes failed to detect that tiny speck that gave us the solution. However, that does not give Doctor Post the right to pry into the affairs of the Pembroke household. It is now a case for the Coroner, and no one else has a right to interfere."

"I appreciate your attitude, Doctor Masterson," I returned, "but Mr. Lawrence, who is, of course, in authority, has given me permission to search this room, and in fact the whole apartment, for possible clues that may help to solve the mystery."

"Humph," grunted the old Doctor, peering at me through his glasses; "if George says so, of course you may do what you like, but I warn you you'd better let the matter alone."

"Have you any suspicions?" I asked suddenly.

"Suspicions? Goodness, no! How could I have any suspicions? You must be crazy!" And without another word the old man hurriedly left the room.

After this exhibition of anger on his part, I felt myself in an unpleasant position. Perhaps I had been over-zealous in my desire to be of service to Miss Pembroke. Perhaps there were clues or evidences better left undiscovered. But, pshaw! such ideas were absurd. Robert Pembroke had been murdered. It was the duty of any American citizen to do anything in his power toward the discovery of the criminal.

Convinced of this, I set to work at once to make a thorough search of the room for anything that might seem indicative.

I merely glanced at the quiet figure lying on the bed, for such evidence as that might show must be determined by the coroner's physicians. I was only seeking stray clues that might otherwise be overlooked, and that might prove to be of value.

Seating myself in front of the open desk, I noted the carefully filed and labeled documents that filled its pigeon-holes.

I could not bring myself to look into these; for though Lawrence had given me unlimited permission, I felt that this personal sort of investigation should be made only by a member of the family.

But in plain view lay a rubber band and a pencilled memorandum which appeared to have been hastily thrown down. The paper slip seemed to show a receipt for ten thousand dollars brought to Robert Pembroke in payment for some stock sold by his brokers. This might all be an unimportant business detail, but in view of the otherwise tidy condition of the desk, it seemed to me to indicate that the intruder had stolen the money or security noted on the slip, leaving the paper and rubber band behind him.

I might be over-fanciful, but there was certainly no harm in preserving this possible evidence, and I put the slip of paper and the rubber band in my pocket-book.

I saw nothing further of interest about the desk, and I turned my attention to the waste basket. On top of a few other torn papers lay the two stubs of theater tickets, which I had myself thrown there, before I knew that there was a crime in question.

I transferred the two bits of paper to my pocket-book and proceeded to investigate further the torn papers in the basket. They seemed to me to have no bearing whatever upon the case, being mostly circulars, receipted small bills, or ordinary business notes.

However, toward the bottom, I found a torn telegram, which pieced together read, "Expect me on Wednesday evening."

It was addressed to Robert Pembroke, and it was signed J. S.

Of course I put this away with my other findings, for though it might be of no importance whatever, yet the contrary might be equally true.

Rising from the desk, I saw a folded paper on the floor near by and picked it up. This proved to be a time-table of local trains on the Lackawanna Railroad. It was not probable that the burglar had left this as a clue to his travels, – it was more likely that it had belonged to Mr. Pembroke or his niece, – but I put it in my pocket, with the general idea of collecting any evidence possible.

Further minute search of the floor revealed nothing whatever but an ordinary hair-pin. With two women in the household, this was not an astonishing find, but I kept it, among my other acquisitions.

At last, feeling convinced that there was nothing more to be learned from the room, I was about to leave it, when I paused by the bedside. Near the foot of the bed, and outside the counterpane, I noticed a handkerchief. I picked it up and its large size proved it to belong to a man. Though slightly crumpled, it was quite fresh, and in the corner three small letters, W. S. G. were embroidered in fine white stitches. These initials were not Robert Pembroke's, and there were of course many plausible explanations of the presence of the handkerchief. But since it didn't seem to represent the property of any member of the household, I felt myself justified in folding it carefully and putting it in my pocket.

As I left the room I cast a final glance around it, feeling certain that a more skilled detective would have discovered many things that I had overlooked, and probably would have scorned to look upon as clues the collection of articles I had pocketed.

But knowing nothing of the personality or habits of Robert Pembroke, it was difficult indeed to judge intelligently the contents and condition of his bedroom.

VI
THE INQUEST BEGINS

When I returned to the drawing-room, I found the coroner had already arrived, accompanied by Inspector Crawford.

Mr. Ross, the coroner, looked like a capable, active man, while Mr. Crawford's face wore the blank and inscrutable expression which is supposed to be part of the detective's stock in trade. I have often wondered whether this imperturbability is not used quite as often to cloak utter ignorance as to hide secret knowledge.

They had been in the house but a few moments, and Doctor Masterson was making them acquainted with the main facts of the case. Young Lawrence was assisting in the recital, but whether because of his natural disinclination for gruesome subjects, or because of his relationship with the dead man, he seemed unwilling to talk, and referred all questions to Doctor Masterson.

I took a seat, and remained a mere listener; as I knew it was not yet the time to tell of any discoveries I might have made.

But beyond a brief introduction by the aged doctor and a brief acknowledgment of it by the coroner, little attention was paid to me, and I listened with interest to Mr. Ross's pertinent questions and quick decisions.

Being possessed of the facts of the case, and having learned all that those present could tell him, the Coroner determined to hold a preliminary inquest right then and there.

Although as a lawyer I have had more or less experience in these matters it seemed to me an incredibly short space of time before a jury was impanelled and the examination of witnesses begun.

There were but a half-dozen men on the jury, and these seemed to spring up out of the very ground. As a matter of fact, Inspector Crawford had gone out and brought some back with him, and others were summoned by telephone.

A reporter also had materialized from somewhere, and was sharpening his pencils in a business-like way as he sat at a small table.

The whole assembly had an official effect, and it seemed as if the magic of some evil fairy had transformed the luxurious drawing-room into a Hall of Justice.

George Lawrence was sent across to bring Miss Pembroke back, and when they came Laura accompanied them.

Doctor Masterson was called as the first witness.

He testified as to the manner and cause of Mr. Pembroke's death.

"Were you Mr. Pembroke's physician?" asked the coroner.

"Yes; I have attended him for twenty years."

"He had no ailments or symptoms that would make his sudden death probable?"

"None that I know of."

"Yet you thought at first that he died of apoplexy?"

"I did, because it seemed to be a case of cerebral hemorrhage, and I looked only for natural causes."

"Why did you call Doctor Post?"

"I didn't feel satisfied to trust my uncorroborated opinion, and desired the advice of another physician."

"After you learned beyond all doubt that Mr. Pembroke had been wilfully murdered, did you observe anything that might point toward a possible criminal?"

"No, nothing at all. I found a key in the bed, which had doubtless slipped from under the pillow. It seemed to be an especial key, as of a box or drawer."

"Where is the key?"

"I handed it to Mr. Landon for safe keeping."

At the request of the Coroner I produced the key, and gave it to him. He turned to Miss Pembroke.

"Was this key the property of your uncle?" he asked.

"I don't know," she replied; "it may have been."

"You have never seen it before, then?"

"Not to my knowledge. But my uncle has several boxes in the bank and in the safe deposit company, and it may belong to one of them."

"Do you know anything of this key, Mr. Lawrence?" pursued the Coroner, turning to the young man.

"I know nothing whatever of my uncle's business affairs, or his boxes or keys. Doubtless his lawyer could tell you of these matters."

"Who is his lawyer, and why has he not been summoned?" said Mr. Ross. He looked at Miss Pembroke, as if she were the one in authority.

"We have sent for him," replied Miss Pembroke, "but he is out of town." As she spoke, the girl's cheeks flushed to a delicate pink, and my heart sank as I began to fear that she was deeply interested in the handsome lawyer, and that her apparently adverse remarks concerning him had been prompted by feminine pique.

The Coroner laid the key on the table before him, as if postponing its further consideration and then called Doctor Post as a witness.

The young man, who had been again summoned from his office, gave his testimony in a fussy, self-important sort of way.

His evidence agreed with all Doctor Masterson had said, and continued thus:

"I felt, like Doctor Masterson, that the effects were not quite those of apoplexy, and so made a thorough examination for other causes of death. At the base of the brain I discovered a small black speck. It proved to be the end of a long pin, which was so deeply imbedded as to be almost invisible. It is not strange that Doctor Masterson should not have discovered it, as it was completely covered by the long, thick white hair of the head."

"This pin, you say, is a hat-pin?"

"A part of a hat-pin. It was evidently inserted while the victim was asleep. It was then, either intentionally or accidentally, broken in half. Owing to a peculiar tendency of human flesh, the pin was probably drawn in a trifle deeper than when left there by the criminal's hand, and thus almost disappeared from view."

"And it was this stab of a pin that caused death?"

"Undoubtedly – and immediately."

Except for a few technical points regarding the cause and effect of cerebral hemorrhage, that was the gist of Doctor Post's evidence.

As the case was indisputably a murder, there being no possibility of suicide, the next thing was to discover the criminal.

Coroner Ross went about his work in a most methodical and systematic manner. His witnesses were called, sworn, questioned, and dismissed with a despatch that amazed me.

The agent of The Hammersleigh, who also lived in the house, was examined next.

"Your name?" asked the Coroner.

"James Whitaker."

"Your occupation?"

"I am agent and superintendent of The Hammersleigh. I live in an apartment on the first floor."

"How long have you had Robert Pembroke as a tenant?"

"Mr. Pembroke has occupied this apartment for three years."

"Of how many members did the family consist?"

"Until about three months ago, there were three in the family. Mr. Pembroke, his niece and nephew. Also, one servant was kept, usually a colored woman. About three months ago, the nephew, Mr. Lawrence, moved away."

"They have proved satisfactory as tenants?"

"Exceedingly so, with one exception. It was always difficult to collect from Mr. Pembroke the money due for his rent."

"He was not a poor man?"

"Quite the contrary. He was a very wealthy man, but he hated to part with his money."

"When did you see him last?"

"Yesterday afternoon. About two o'clock I came up here to ask him for his rent which was overdue."

"He paid you?"

"Yes; he paid me with bills of large denomination, taken from a very large roll of similar bills. He must have had about ten thousand dollars in the roll."

I listened with great interest to this evidence. Surely that roll of bills which Mr. Whitaker saw was the money noted on the memorandum I had found.

"Were the bills in a rubber band, and was a slip of paper with them?" I asked, for the inquest was conducted informally, and anyone spoke who chose.

"Yes," replied Whitaker, looking at me with a glance that savored of suspicion; "how did you know?"

I resented his manner, and then I suddenly remembered that I was but a new tenant, and the agent was justified in his desire to question me.

"Mr. Landon will be examined later," said the Coroner, with his authoritative air; "we will continue with the present witness. What can you say, Mr. Whitaker, of the general character of Mr. Pembroke?"

"I know little of him. As a tenant he made me no trouble at all. He never complained to me of the apartment, the management or the service. As a business man, I have no reason to think him other than upright and honorable. Further than this I had no acquaintance with him. He was not a man to invite acquaintance."

"He was of uncertain temper, I understand."

"Well, it could hardly be called uncertain." Mr. Whitaker smiled a little. "On the contrary, his temper was certain to be bad. He was an inveterate scold, and sometimes would fly into a most ungovernable rage over nothing at all. But this was not my affair; he always paid his rent, – though only under protest, and after numerous requests."

"When you saw him yesterday, was he ill-tempered?"

"Very much so. I would say unusually so, except that he was usually as cross as any man could be."

"What was he cross about?"

"Everything and nothing. He railed at the government, the weather, his lawyer, his niece, – and in fact, spoke angrily upon any subject that was mentioned between us."

"Then you can tell us nothing, Mr. Whitaker, that will throw any light upon the crime that has been committed in your house?"

"Nothing at all."

"Would it be possible for a marauder or intruder to get in during the night?"

"Into the house, yes. The front doors are open until midnight. Each tenant is supposed to safeguard his own apartment."

"And you know of no questionable person who entered the house last night?"

"Certainly not. I have no reason to notice those who come or go. The elevator boy might tell you."

Mr. Whitaker was dismissed, and the elevator boy was sent for. He was rather a clever-looking young fellow of about seventeen, and his face, though impudent, was shrewd and intelligent.

"Samuel McGuire, me name is," he announced, in response to the Coroner's question; "but the fellers call me Solomon, cos I know mor'n they do. I studies and reads every chance I gets, and they jes' loafs 'round."

"Well, Samuel, what can you tell us of Mr. Pembroke?"

"Nuttin good. But then they ain't much to tell. He never trun himself loose outen his own door; but I didn't mind his bein' canned, cos I knew he couldn't pry himself loose from a tip, any way. So I never seen him since the day he came; but gee, I've often heard him! Say, the Mauretoonia's fog-horn ain't got nothin' on him! Tain't no silent treatment he gives that niece of his'n! Nur that classy brunette soivant, neither!"

"He was not even kindly-spoken to his niece, then?"

"I guess no! Gee, the foist time I seen that skoit, I t'ought I'd been shot in the eye wit' a magazine cover! An' she's as daisy actin' as she is lookin'. I sure admire Miss Pembroke!"

This was not the kind of information Mr. Ross wanted, but young McGuire rolled it forth so rapidly, and with such graphic facial expression that his audience listened, uninterrupting.

"That's enough, McGuire," said Mr. Ross, sternly; "please confine your speech to simple and direct answers to my questions."

"Sure," agreed the boy, grinning. "But I thought you wanted me to tell you all what I was wise to of the family's doin's."

"What I want to know especially, is, whether any one came into the house last evening, or late last night, who was a stranger to you?"

"Well, no; I ain't seen no Rube divin' into my cage, wot looks suspicionary. But then, you see, Mr. Coroner, I ain't on the night shift. This week I goes off at six P. M. and toddles myself off to a tremblin' scenery show."

"Then you're not the elevator boy we want, at all," said Mr. Ross, greatly annoyed at this loss of time.

"Be-lieve me, I ain't! But I'm glad to add it against brother Pembroke. He never left his rooms, but, gee! he didn't have to, fer me to hear him bally-hooin'! Every time I passed this floor, 'most, he wuz a handin' it out to the young lady good an' plenty!"

McGuire was excused, and being loath to leave the room, he was materially assisted by Inspector Crawford.

Though not an attractive specimen of his class, and though his evidence was unimportant, he had at least helped to prove the irascibility of the late Mr. Pembroke, and the fact that his ugly temper was often vented upon his niece.

As I learned all this, I felt more than ever glad that Janet was at last freed from this tyrant. Indeed, my attention was only half given to the business in hand. My thoughts continually wandered to the girl who had, all unconsciously, twined herself around my heart. I found myself wondering where she would go when this was all over; how soon I could cultivate her acquaintance; and if – in the future – I could at last win her for my own. It was my first infatuation with any woman, and I gave myself up to it unreservedly, while my soul thrilled with hopes of what might some time be. To be sure, Miss Pembroke had not so much as glanced at me with other than the most formal politeness, such as she might show to any new acquaintance. But I would not let this discourage me. Because it was love at first sight on my side was no reason why it should be on hers, so I only determined to win her, if possible, and to be careful that she should not yet discover my feelings toward herself.

From these rose-colored dreams I was suddenly recalled to the dreadful realities of the occasion by hearing myself summoned as a witness.

I took the stand, hoping that some chance word or tone of my otherwise unimportant evidence might at least convince Miss Pembroke of my friendly interest in her and her affairs.

VII
I GIVE EVIDENCE

"Your name," said the Coroner to me.

"Otis Landon."

"You live in this house?"

"Yes, I live in the apartment across the hall, on this same floor. It is a duplicate of this apartment."

"Please tell in your own words," said Mr. Ross, "exactly what you know of this matter."

And so I told my story. "I am a lawyer, and a bachelor," I said. "My widowed sister, Mrs. Mulford, keeps house for me. As we sat at breakfast this morning the door-bell rang. Knowing from the hour – just about eight o'clock – that it was probably the hall boy with the mail, I opened the door myself, and took the letters from him. As I stood a moment, carelessly running over the mail, the boy pressed the button at the opposite apartment – the one where we now are. The colored servant came to the door, and though she unlatched it at once, it was held by a chain."

Just here Inspector Crawford interrupted me.

"The night-chain was on, you say?"

"Yes," I answered; "I heard the colored woman's voice exclaiming that she always forgot to remove the night-chain before opening the door; so she reclosed the door, unfastened the chain, and opened the door again. She then took the letters and went back to the apartment. I returned to my own breakfast. Perhaps half an hour later I started for my office. As I was waiting for the elevator to come up, my sister stood with me, chatting. When the elevator did arrive I saw a gentleman in it, who, I have since learned, is Doctor Masterson. As the car reached our floor Miss Pembroke rushed from her own apartment to meet the doctor, exclaiming that her uncle was ill. My sister and I were much concerned, and offered our assistance. A few moments later Doctor Masterson came and asked us to come over here, as Mr. Pembroke was dead and Miss Pembroke had fainted. We came at once, and have endeavored to do anything we could to help."

For some reason, Doctor Masterson seemed disturbed at my remarks. Why, I could not guess, for I had told the exact truth, and it seemed to me to have little bearing on the circumstances of the old man's death. On the other hand, what I had said seemed to give satisfaction to the Coroner. He nodded his head affirmatively several times, and it was plain to be seen that my testimony corroborated, at least did not contradict some already formed theory of his own.

After a slight pause, while he seemed to weigh in his mind the evidence I had given, he resumed his questioning.

"I am told Mr. Landon, that you searched Mr. Pembroke's bedroom for possible clues. Did you find any?"

"I am not sure," I replied; "in a room that one has never seen before, it is difficult to know what belongs there and what does not. However I picked up a few articles, which, though they may be informative, are equally likely to be of no importance to us in our search."

I offered first in evidence the memorandum of money and the rubber band still around it. The slight crumpling of the paper, seemed to show a hasty removal of the money, – if money had been enclosed.

"This seems to me to be of decided importance," commented Mr. Ross; "indeed, unless some member of the household can throw light on the matter, I shall conclude that a sum of money was stolen from Mr. Pembroke, and that the robbery constituted the motive for either previous or subsequent murder."

This seemed to me both rational and logical, and I waited with interest the next questions.

Mr. Ross first addressed Miss Pembroke.

"Do you know anything concerning this money?" he inquired, simply.

Janet Pembroke was sitting on a sofa, next to Laura. As, with the exception of the colored servant, they were the only women present, Laura assumed the attitude of chaperon and protector to the young girl. And it was doubtless due to my sister's sympathy and support, that Miss Pembroke was preserving a calm demeanor. But at the Coroner's question, she became greatly agitated. She trembled, and her fingers grasped nervously at Laura's arm as she stammered a reply.

"I – I – I know that Uncle Robert had a large sum of money in his possession yesterday."

"Where did he get it?"

"His lawyer, Mr. Leroy, brought it to him night before last."

"Was it as much as ten thousand dollars, as this memorandum seems to indicate?"

"I – I – I think it was."

What was the matter with the girl? If she had stolen the money herself, she could not have acted more guiltily embarrassed. To me, the idea of theft in connection with Janet Pembroke was absurd, but I could readily see from the countenances of the men about me, that the situation impressed them quite otherwise.

"Was Mr. Pembroke in the habit of keeping such large sums of money in the house?"

"No; it was most unusual."

"How, then, did it happen in this instance?"

"I am not quite sure;" and now Miss Pembroke looked anxious and puzzled, rather than frightened, as she had appeared before, "I think he expected a man to come to see him, to whom he would pay the money."

"Do you know the name of this man?"

"It was, – no, – I do not."

I think no one present believed this statement. It was made with too much hesitation and uncertainty.

"Are you sure, Miss Pembroke that you do not know the name of the man for whom your uncle intended the money?"

The girl's uncertainty appeared to vanish. "I do not!" she cried; "my uncle was not in the habit of confiding to me his business matters. But he often spoke in loud tones, and quite unintentionally I overheard a few words between him and Mr. Leroy, which gave me the impression that he intended the money for some man who would soon call to receive it."

"Do you know anything concerning this money?" Mr. Ross then said, addressing his question to George Lawrence.

The young man had been sitting watching his cousin in silence. He seemed absorbed in deep thought and roused himself suddenly as the Coroner spoke to him.

"No," he said, with an air of detachment from the whole affair; "I know nothing at all of these matters. I saw my uncle for a few moments yesterday afternoon, but he said nothing to me about money, or his financial affairs of any sort."

"Did you see your uncle in his own room?" I asked, of Mr. Lawrence.

"Yes," he replied giving me a glance, which, though coldly polite, seemed to resent my interference. But I was not to be baffled in my intent.

"Was his desk open when you were there?" I went on.

"I didn't notice definitely, but it is usually open. Indeed, I think I have never seen it closed."

"And did you see a large roll of bills in it?" I relentlessly pursued.

"I did not; nor should I have remarked it if I had. If my uncle chose to be careless with his cash it was not my affair."

"It is possible the money may yet be found," observed the coroner; "Mr. Pembroke may have put it away more safely. Search must be made for it, but at present we will continue our verbal evidence. Mr. Landon, what else did you find in your search?"

"I found this time-table," I replied, feeling a little foolish as I gave it to the Coroner.

"H'm, local trains on the Lackawanna," he murmured, as he glanced at it; "Miss Pembroke, is this likely to have belonged to your uncle?"

Again the girl became agitated. "I think not," she said; "no, it couldn't have been his. Uncle Robert never went out anywhere. Why should he have a time-table?"

"Is it your own?"

"No; I have not travelled on that road for a long time, and have had no thought of doing so."

Then the Coroner turned to Charlotte. "Do you know anything about this?" he asked; "have you ever seen it before?"

"Laws, no!" replied the colored woman, rolling her eyes distractedly. "I nebber trabbels myself, and Marse Pembroke, he nebber trabbled outside de do'. And Miss Janet she ain't nebber been trabblin' since I'se been here – dat I knows on."

"Then it would seem," said Mr. Ross, "that this time-table must have been left in the room by some outsider. Do you know anything of it, Mr. Lawrence?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.