Hay James

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No Clue A Mystery Story:

Содержание

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I
THE GREY ENVELOPE

Catherine Brace walked slowly from the mantel-piece to the open window and back again. Within the last hour she had done that many times, always to halt before the mantel and gaze at the oblong, grey envelope that leaned against the clock. Evidently, she regarded it as a powerful agency. An observer would have perceived that she saw tremendous things come out of it – and that she considered them with mingled satisfaction and defiance.

Her attitude, however, betrayed no hint of hesitation. Rather, the fixity of her gaze and the intensity of her mental concentration threw into high relief the hardness of her personality. She was singularly devoid of that quality which is generally called feminine softness.

And she was a forceful woman. She had power. It was in her lean, high-shouldered, ungraceful figure. It was in her thin, mobile lips and her high-bridged nose with its thin, clean-cut nostrils. She impressed herself upon her environment. Standing there at the mantel, her hands clasped behind her, she was so

caught up by the possibilities of the future that she succeeded in imparting to the grey envelope an almost animate quality.

She became aware once more of voices in the next room: a man's light baritone in protest, followed by the taunt of her daughter's laugh. Although she left the mantel with lithe, swift step, it was with unusual deliberation that she opened the communicating door.

Her voice was free of excitement when, ignoring her daughter's caller, she said:

"Mildred, just a moment, please."

Mildred came in and closed the door. Her mother, now near the window across the room, looked first at her and then at the grey envelope.

"I thought," Mrs. Brace said, "you'd forgotten you were going to mail it."

"Why didn't you mail it yourself?" The tone of that was cool insolence.

Mother and daughter were strikingly alike – hair piled high in a wide wave above the forehead; black eyes too restless, but of that gleaming brilliance which heralds a refusal to grow old. So far, however, the daughter's features had not assumed an aspect of sharpness, like the mother's. One would have appraised the older woman vindictive – malevolent, possibly.

But in the younger face the mouth greatly softened, almost concealed, this effect of calculating hardness. Mildred Brace's lips had a softness of line, a vividness of colouring that indicated

emotional depths utterly foreign to her mother.

They bore themselves now as if they commented on a decision already reached, a momentous step to which they had given immense consideration.

"I didn't mail it," Mrs. Brace answered her daughter's query, "because I knew, if you mailed it, you'd do as you'd said you wanted to do."

There was frank emphasis on the "said."

"Your feet don't always follow your intelligence, you know."

"I've been thinking about the thing," Mildred retorted, looking over her mother's shoulder into the summer night. "What's the use?"

"What's the use!" Mrs. Brace echoed, incredulous.

"Just that."

"We've been all over it! You know what it means to you – to both of us."

They spoke in low tones, careful that the man in the living room should not hear.

"My dear mother," Mildred said, with a return of her cool insolence, "you display a confidence hardly warranted by your – and our – man-experience."

She yawned slightly.

There was a harsher note in her mother's reply.

"He can't refuse. He can't!"

Mildred stared at the grey envelope a full three minutes. Mrs. Brace, wordless, showing no uneasiness as to the outcome,

waited for her to speak.

"It's no use, mother," she said at last. "We can't manage it – him – this thing. It's too late."

The flat finality, the dreariness, of that announcement angered the older woman. Calmness fell from her. She came away from the window slowly, her hands clasped tightly at her back, the upper part of her body bending forward a little, her thin nostrils expanding and contracting to the force of her hurried breathing like leaves shaken in the wind. The curl of her thin lips added a curious ferocity to the words that passed them. She spoke, only when her face was within a few inches of Mildred's.

"No use!" she said contemptuously, her lowered voice explosive with passion. "Why? And why too late? Have you no self-respect, no will, no firmness? Are you all jelly and – "

She got hold of herself with remarkable effectiveness, throwing off the signs of her wrath as suddenly as they had appeared. She retreated a step and laughed, without mirth.

"Oh, well," she said, "it's your party, not mine, after all. But, in future, my dear, don't waste your time and mine in school-girl heroics."

She completed her retreat and stood again at the window. Her self-restraint was, in a way, fiercer than her rage – and it affected her daughter.

"You see," she concluded, "why I didn't mail it. I knew you wouldn't do the very thing you'd outlined."

Mildred looked at the envelope again. The pause that followed

was broken by the man in the other room.

"Mildred," he called.

Mrs. Brace laughed silently. Mildred, seeing that ridicule, recoiled.

"What are you laughing at?" she demanded.

Her mother pointed to the communicating door.

"I was thinking of *that*," she said, "for life – and," she looked toward the grey envelope, "the other thing."

"I don't see – " Mildred began, and checked herself, gazing again at the envelope.

Her mother turned swiftly and stood looking into the night. The man called again and was not answered. The two women were motionless. There was no sound in the room, save the ticking of the clock on the mantel. Two minutes passed – three.

Mildred went toward the mantel, put out her hand, withdrew it. She became conscious of the excessive heat and touched her forehead with her handkerchief. She glanced at her mother's motionless figure, started to speak, closed her parted lips. Indecision shook her. She put out her hand again, picked up the envelope and stood tapping it against her left palm.

Mrs. Brace, without moving, spoke at last:

"It's a few minutes of twelve. If you catch the midnight collection, he'll get it, out there, by five o'clock tomorrow afternoon."

There was another pause.

Mildred went slowly to the door leading into the living room,

and once more she was on the point of speaking.

Mrs. Brace was drumming her fingers on the window ledge. The action announced plainly that she had finished with the situation. Mildred put her hand on the knob, pulled the door half-open, closed it again.

"I've changed my mind," she said, dreariness still in her voice. "He can't refuse."

Her mother made no comment.

Mildred went into the living room.

"Gene," she said, with that indifference of tone which a woman employs toward a man she despises, "I'm going down to mail this."

"Well, I'll swear!" he quarrelled sullenly. "Been in there all this time writing to him!"

"Yes! Look at it!" she taunted viciously, and waved the envelope before his eyes. "Sloanehurst!"

Taking up his hat, he went with her to the elevator.

II
THE WOMAN ON THE LAWN

Mr. Jefferson Hastings, unsuspecting that he was about to be confronted with the most brutal crime in all his experience, regretted having come to "Sloanehurst." He disapproved of himself unreservedly. Clad in an ample, antique night-shirt, he stood at a window of the guest-room assigned to him and gazed over the steel rims of his spectacles into the hot, rainy night. His real vision, however, made no attempt to pierce the outer darkness. His eyes were turned inward, upon himself, in derision of his behaviour during the past three hours.

A kindly, reticent gentleman, who looked much older than his fifty-three years, he made it his habit to listen rather than talk. His wide fame as a criminologist and consulting detective had implanted no egotism in him. He abhorred the spotlight.

But tonight Judge Wilton, by skilful use of query, suggestion and reminder, had tempted him into talking "shop." He had been lured into the rôle of monologuist for the benefit of his host, Arthur Sloane. He had talked brilliantly, at length, in detail, holding his three hearers in spellbound and fascinated interest while he discoursed on crimes which he had probed and criminals whom he had known.

Not that he *thought* he had talked brilliantly! By no means!

He was convinced that nine-tenths of the interest manifested in his remarks had been dictated by politeness. Old Hastings was just that sort of person; he discounted himself. He was in earnest, therefore, in his present self-denunciation. He sighed, remembering the volume of his discourse, the awful length of time in which he had monopolized the conversation.

But his modesty was not his only admirable characteristic. He had, also, a dependable sense of humour. It came to his relief now – he thought of his host, a chuckle throttling the beginnings of a second sigh deep down in his throat.

This was not the first time that Arthur Broughton Sloane had provoked a chuckle, although, for him, life was a house of terror, a torture chamber constructed with fiendish ingenuity. Mr. Sloane suffered from "nerves." He was spending his declining years in the arduous but surprisingly successful task of being wretched, irritable and ill-at-ease.

The variety of his agonies was equalled only by the alacrity with which he tested every cure or remedy of which he happened to hear. He agreed enthusiastically with his expensive physicians that he was neurasthenic, psychasthenic and neurotic.

His eyes were weak; his voice was weak; his spirit was weak. He shivered all day with terror at the idea of not sleeping at night. Every evening he quivered with horror at the thought of not waking up next morning. And yet, despite these absorbing, although not entirely delightful, preoccupations, Mr. Sloane was not without an object in life.

In fact, he had two objects in life: the happiness of his daughter, Lucille, and the study of crime and criminals. The latter interest had brought Hastings to the Sloane country home in Virginia. Judge Wilton, an old friend of the wrecked and wealthy Mr. Sloane, had met the detective on the street in Washington and urged:

"Go down to Sloanehurst and spend Saturday night. I'll be there when you arrive. Sloane's got his mind set on seeing you; and you won't regret it. His library on criminology will be a revelation, even to you."

And Hastings, largely because he shrank from seeming ungracious, had accepted Mr. Sloane's subsequent invitation.

Climbing now into the old-fashioned four-poster bed, he thought again of his conversation-spree and longed for self-justification. He sat up, sheetless, reflecting:

"As a week-ender, I'm a fine old chatter-box! – But young Webster got me! What did he say? – 'The cleverer the criminal, the easier to run him down. The thug, acting on the spur of the moment, with a blow in the dark and a getaway through the night, leaves no trace behind him. Your "smart criminal" always overreaches himself.' – A pretty theory, but wild. Anyway, it made me forget myself; I talked my old fool head off."

He felt himself blush.

"Wish I'd let Wilton do the disproving; he was anxious enough."

A mental picture of Sloane consoled him once more.

"Silk socks and gingham gumption!" he thought. "But he's honest in his talk about being interested in crime. The man loves crime! – Good thing he's got plenty of money."

He fell asleep, in a kind of ruminative growl:

"Made a fool of myself – babbling about what *I* remembered – what *I* thought! I'll go back to Washington – in the morning."

Judge Wilton's unsteady voice, supplemented by a rattling of the doorknob, roused him. He had thrust one foot out of bed when Wilton came into the room.

"Quick! Come on, man!" the judge instructed, and hurried into the hall.

"What's wrong?" Hastings demanded, reaching for his spectacles.

Wilton, on his way down the stairs, flung back:

"A woman hurt – outside."

From the hall below came Mr. Sloane's high-pitched, complaining tones:

"Unfathomable angels! What do you say? – Who?"

Drawing on shoes and trousers, the detective overtook his host on the front verandah and followed him down the steps and around the northeast corner of the house. He noticed that Sloane carried in one hand an electric torch and in the other a bottle of smelling salts. It was no longer raining.

Rounding the corner, they saw, scarcely fifteen yards from the bay-window of the ballroom, the upturned face of a woman who lay prostrate on the lawn. Lights had been turned on in the house,

making a glow which cut through the starless night.

The woman did not move. Judge Wilton was in the act of kneeling beside her.

"Hold on!" Hastings called out. "Don't disturb her – if she's dead."

"She is dead!" said Wilton.

"Who is she?" The detective, trying to find signs of life, put his hand over her heart.

"I don't know," Wilton answered the question. "Do you, Sloane?"

"Of course, I don't!"

Hastings said afterwards that Sloane's reply expressed astonished resentment that he should be suspected of knowing anybody vulgar enough to be murdered on his lawn.

The detective drew back his hand. His fingers were dark with blood.

At that moment Berne Webster, Lucille Sloane's fiancé, came from the rear of the house, announcing breathlessly:

"No 'phone connection – this time of night, judge. – It's past midnight. – I sent chauffeur – Lally – for the sheriff."

Hastings stood up, his first, cursory examination concluded.

"No doubt about it," he said. "She's dead. – Bring a blanket, somebody!"

Mr. Sloane's nerves had the best of him by this time. He trembled like a man with a chill, rattling the bottle of smelling salts against the metal end of his electric torch. He had on slippers

and a light dressing gown over his pajamas.

Wilton was fully dressed, young Webster collarless but wearing a black, light-weight lounging jacket. Hastings was struck with the different degrees of their dress, or undress.

"Who found her?" he asked, looking at Webster.

"Judge Wilton – and I," said Webster, so short of breath that his chest heaved.

"How long ago?"

Wilton answered that:

"A few minutes, hardly five minutes. I ran in to call you and Sloane."

"And Mr. – you, Mr. Webster?"

"The judge told me to – to get the sheriff – by telephone."

Hastings knelt again over the woman's body.

"Here, Mr. Sloane," he ordered, "hold that torch closer, will you?"

Mr. Sloane found compliance impossible. He could not steady his hand sufficiently.

"Hold that torch, judge," Hastings prompted.

"It's knocked me out – completely," Sloane said, surrendering the torch to Wilton.

Webster, the pallor still on his face, a look of horror in his eyes, stood on the side of the body opposite the detective. At brief intervals he raised first one foot, then the other, clear of the ground and set it down again. He was unconscious of making any movement at all.

Hastings, thoroughly absorbed in the work before him, went about it swiftly, with now and then brief, murmured comment on what he did and saw. Although his ample night-shirt, stuffed into his equally baggy trousers, contributed nothing but comicality to his appearance, the others submitted without question to his domination. There was about him suddenly an atmosphere of power that impressed even the little group of awe-struck servants who stood a few feet away.

"Stabbed," he said, after he had run his hands over the woman's figure; "died instantly – must have. Got her heart. – Young – not over twenty-five, would you say? – Not dead long. – Anybody call a doctor?"

"I told Lally to stop by Dr. Garnet's house and send him – at once," Webster said, his voice low, and broken. "He's the coroner, too."

Hastings continued his examination. The brief pause that ensued was broken by a woman's voice:

"Pauline! Pauline!"

The call came from one of the upstairs windows. Hearing it, a woman in the servant group hurried into the house.

Webster groaned: "My God!"

"Frantic fiends! It gets worse and worse!" Sloane objected shrilly. "My nerves! And Lucille's annoyed – shocked!"

He held the smelling bottle to his nose, breathing deeply.

"Here! Take this!" Hastings directed, and put up his hand abruptly.

Sloane had so gone to pieces that the movement frightened him. He stepped back in such obvious terror that a hoarse guffaw of involuntary ridicule escaped one of the servants. The detective, finding that his kneeling posture made it difficult to put his handkerchief back into his trousers pocket, had thrust it toward Sloane. That gentleman having so suddenly removed himself out of reach, Hastings stuck the handkerchief into Judge Wilton's coat-pocket.

Arthur Sloane, the detective said later, never forgave him that unexpected wave of the handkerchief – and the servant's ridiculing laugh.

Hastings looked up to Wilton.

"Did you find any weapon?"

"I didn't look – didn't take time."

"Neither did I," young Webster added.

Hastings, disregarding the wet grass, was on his hands and knees, searching. He accomplished a complete circuit of the body, his round-shouldered, stooping figure making grotesque, elephantine shadows under the light of the torch as he moved about slowly, not trusting his eyes, but feeling with his hands every inch of the smallest, half-lit spaces.

Nobody else took part in the search. Having accepted his leadership from the outset, they seemed to take it for granted that he needed no help. Mentally benumbed by the horror of the tragedy, they stood there in the quiet, summer night, barren of ideas. They were like children, waiting to be instructed.

Hastings stood erect, pulling and hauling at his trousers.

"Can't find a knife or anything," he said. "Glad I can't. Hope he took it with him."

"Why?" asked Sloane, through chattering teeth.

"May help us to find him – may be a clue in the end."

He was silent a moment, squinting under the rims of his spectacles, looking down at the figure of the dead woman. He had already covered the face with the hat she had worn, a black straw sailor; but neither he nor the others found it easy to forget the peculiar and forbidding expression the features wore, even in death. It was partly fear, partly defiance – as if her last conscious thought had been a flitting look into the future, an exulting recognition of the certain consequences of the blow that had struck her down.

Put into words, it might have been: "You've murdered me, but you'll pay for it – terribly!"

A servant handed Hastings the blanket he had ordered. He looked toward the sky.

"I don't think it will rain any more," he said. "And it's best to leave things as they are until the coroner arrives. – He'll be here soon?"

"Should get here in half an hour or so," Judge Wilton informed him.

The detective arranged the blanket so that it covered the prone form completely, leaving the hat over the face as he had first placed it. With the exception of the hat, he had disturbed no part

of the apparel. Even the folds of the raincoat, which fell away from the body and showed the rain-soaked black skirt, he left as he had found them. The white shirtwaist, also partly exposed now, was dry.

"Anybody move her hat before I came out?" he asked; "you, judge; or you, Mr. Webster?"

They had not touched it, they said; it was on the grass, beside her head, when they discovered the body, and they had left it there.

Again he was silent, brows drawn together as he stood over the murdered woman. Finally, he raised his head swiftly and, taking each in turn, searched sharply the countenances of the three men before him.

"Does – didn't anybody here know this woman?" he asked.

Berne Webster left his place at the opposite side of the body and came close to Hastings.

"I know who she is," he said, his voice lower even than before, as if he wished to keep that information from the servants.

Hastings' keen scrutiny had in it no intimation of surprise. Waiting for Webster to continue, he was addressed by the shivering Mr. Sloane:

"Mr. Hast – Mr. Hastings, take charge of – of things. Will you? You know about these things."

The detective accepted the suggestion.

"Suppose we get at what we know about it – what we all know. Let's go inside." He turned to the servants: "Stay here until you're

called. See that nothing is disturbed, nothing touched."

He led the way into the house. Sloane, near collapse, clung to one of Judge Wilton's broad shoulders. It was young Webster who, as the little procession passed the hatrack in the front hall, caught up a raincoat and threw it over the half-clad Hastings.

III
THE UNEXPECTED WITNESS

In the library Hastings turned first to Judge Wilton for a description of the discovery of the body. The judge was in better condition than the others for connected narrative, Arthur Sloane had sunk into a morris chair, where he sighed audibly and plied himself by fits and starts with the aroma from the bottle of smelling salts. Young Webster, still breathing as if he had been through exhausting physical endeavour, stood near the table in the centre of the room, mechanically shifting his weight from foot to foot.

Wilton, seated half-across the room from Hastings, drew, absently, on a dead cigar-stump. A certain rasping note in his voice was his only remaining symptom of shock. He had the stern calmness of expression that is often seen in the broad, irregularly-featured face in early middle age.

"I can tell you in very few words," he said, addressing the detective directly. "We all left this room, you'll remember, at eleven o'clock. I found my bedroom uncomfortable, too warm. Besides, it had stopped raining. When I noticed that, I decided to go out and smoke my good-night cigar. This is what's left of it."

He put a finger to the unlighted stump still between his lips.

"What time did you go out?" asked Hastings.

"Probably, a quarter of an hour after I'd gone upstairs – fifteen or twenty minutes past eleven, I should guess."

"How did you go out – by what door?"

"The front door. I left it unlocked, but not open. At first I paced up and down, on the south side of the house, under the trees. It was reasonably light there then – that is to say, the clouds had thinned a little, and, after my eyes had got accustomed to it, I had no trouble in avoiding the trees and shrubbery.

"Then a cloud heavier than the others came up, I suppose. Anyway, it was much darker. There wasn't a light in the house, except in my room and Berne Webster's. Yours was out, I remember. I passed by the front of the house then, and went around to the north side. It was darker there, I thought, than it had been under the trees on the south side."

"How long had you been out then, altogether?"

"Thirty or forty minutes." He looked at his watch. "It's a quarter past twelve now. Let me see. I found the body a few minutes after I changed over to the north side. I guess I found it about five minutes before midnight – certainly not more than twenty minutes ago."

Hastings betrayed his impatience only by squinting under his spectacles and down the line of his nose, eying Wilton closely.

"All right, judge! Let's have it."

"I was going along slowly, very slowly, not doing much more than feeling my way with my feet on the close-shaven grass. It was the darkest night I ever saw. Literally, I couldn't have seen

my hand in front of me.

"I had decided to turn about and go indoors when I was conscious of some movement, or slight sound, directly in front of me, and downward, at my feet. I got that impression."

"What movement? You mean the sound of a fall?"

"No; not that exactly."

"A footstep?"

"No. I hadn't any definite idea what sort of noise it was. I did think that, perhaps, it was a dog or a cat. Just then my foot came in contact with something soft. I stooped down instinctively, immediately.

"At that moment, that very second, a light flashed on in Arthur's bedroom. That's between this room and the big ballroom – on this floor, of course. That light threw a long, illuminating shaft into the murky darkness, the end of it coming just far enough to touch me and – what I found – the woman's body. I saw it by that light before I had time to touch it with my hand."

The judge stopped and drew heavily on his dead cigar.

"All right. See anything else?" Hastings urged.

"Yes; I saw Berne Webster. He had made the noise which attracted my attention."

"How do you know that?"

"He must have. He was stooping down, too, on the other side of the body, facing me, when the light went on – "

Sloane, twisting nervously in his chair, cut into Wilton's

narrative.

"I can put this much straight," he said in shrill complaint: "I turned on the light you're talking about. I hadn't been able to sleep."

"Let's have this, one at a time, if you don't mind, Mr. Sloane," the detective suggested, watching Webster.

The young man, staring with fascinated intensity at Judge Wilton, seemed to experience some new horror as he listened.

"He was on the other side of it," the judge continued, "and practically in the same position that I was. We faced each other across the body. I think that describes the discovery, as you call it. We immediately examined the woman, looking for the wound, and found it. When we saw she was dead, we came in to wake you – and try to get a doctor. I told Berne to do that."

During the last few sentences Hastings had been walking slowly from his chair to the library door and back, his hands gouged deep into his trouser-pockets, folds of his night-shirt protruding from and falling over the waistband of the trousers, the raincoat hanging baggily from his shoulders. Ludicrous as the costume was, however, the old man so dominated them still that none of them, not even Wilton, questioned his authority.

And yet, the thing he was doing should have appealed to them as noteworthy. A man of less power could not have accomplished it. Coming from a sound sleep to the scene of a murder, he had literally picked up these men who had discovered it and who must be closely touched by it, had overcome their agitation, had herded

them into the house and, with amazing promptness, had set about the task of getting from them the stories of what they knew and what they had done.

Appreciating his opportunity, he had determined to bring to light at once everything they knew. He devoted sudden attention now to Webster, whom he knew by reputation – a lawyer thirty years of age, brilliant in the criminal courts, and at present striving for a foothold in the more remunerative ranks of civil practice. He had never been introduced to him, however, before meeting him at Sloanehurst.

"Who touched that body first – Mr. Webster?" he demanded, his slow promenade uninterrupted as he kept his eyes on the lawyer's.

"Judge – I don't know, I believe," Webster replied uncertainly. "Who did, judge?"

"I want your recollection," Hastings insisted, kindly in spite of the unmistakable command of his tone. "That's why I asked you."

"Why?"

"For one thing, it might go far toward showing who was really first on the scene."

"I see; but I really don't remember. I'm not sure that either of us touched the body – just then. I think we both drew back, instinctively, when the light flashed on. Afterwards, of course, we both touched her – looking for signs of life."

The detective came to a standstill in front of Webster.

"Who reached the body first? Can you say?"

"No. I don't think either was first. We got there together."

"Simultaneously?"

"Yes."

"But I'm overlooking something. How did you happen to be there?"

"That's simple enough," Webster said, his brows drawn together, his eyes toward the floor, evidently making great effort to omit no detail of what had occurred. "I went to my room when we broke up here, at eleven. I read for a while. I got tired of that – it was close and hot. Besides, I never go to bed before one in the morning – that is, practically never. And I wasn't sleepy.

"I looked at my watch. It was a quarter to twelve. Like the judge, I noticed that it had stopped raining. I thought I'd have a better night's sleep if I got out and cooled off thoroughly. My room, the one I have this time, is close to the back stairway. I went down that, and out the door on the north side."

"Were you smoking?" Hastings put the query sharply, as if to test the narrator's nerves.

Webster's frown deepened.

"No. But I had cigarettes and matches with me. I intended to smoke – and walk about."

"But what happened?"

"It was so much darker than I had thought that I groped along with my feet, much as Judge Wilton did. I was making my way toward the front verandah. I went on, sliding my feet on the wet

grass."

"Any reason for doing that, do you remember? Are there any obstructions there, anything but smooth, open lawn?"

"No. It was merely an instinctive act – in pitch dark, you know."

Webster, his eyes still toward the floor, waited for another question. Not getting it, he resumed:

"My foot struck something soft. I thought it was a wet cloak, something of that sort, left out in the rain. I hadn't heard a thing. And I had no premonition of anything wrong. I bent over, with nothing more than sheer idle curiosity, to put my hand on whatever the thing was. And just then the light went on in Mr. Sloane's bedroom. The judge and I were looking at each other across somebody lying on the ground, face upward."

"Either of you cry out?"

"No."

"Say anything?"

"Not much."

"Well, what?"

"I remember the judge said, 'Is she dead?' I said, 'How is she hurt?' We didn't say much while we were looking for the wound."

"Did you tell Judge Wilton you knew her?"

"No. There wasn't time for any explanation – specially."

"But you do know her?"

"I told you that, sir, outside – just now."

"All right. Who is she?" Hastings put that query carelessly,

in a way which might have meant that he had heard the most important part of the young lawyer's story. That impression was heightened by his beginning again to pace the floor.

"Her name's Mildred Brace," replied Webster, moistening his lips with his tongue. "She was my stenographer for eight months."

The detective drew up sharply.

"When?"

"Until two weeks ago."

"She resign?"

"Yes. No – I discharged her."

"What for?"

"Incompetence."

"I don't understand that exactly. You mean you employed her eight months although she was incompetent?"

"That's pretty bald," Webster objected. "Her incompetence came, rather, from temperament. She was, toward the last, too nervous, excitable. She was more trouble than she was worth."

"Ah, that's different," Hastings said, with a significance that was clear. "People might have thought," he elaborated, "if you had fired her for other reasons, this tragedy tonight would have put you in an unenviable position – to say the least."

He had given words to the vague feeling which had depressed them all, ever since the discovery of the murder; that here was something vastly greater than the accidental finding of a person killed by an outsider, that the crime touched Sloanehurst

personally. The foreboding had been patent – almost, it seemed, a tangible thing – but, until this moment, each had steered clear of it, in speech.

Webster's response was bitter.

"They'll want to say it anyway, I guess." To that he added, in frank resentment: "And I might as well enter a denial here: I had nothing to do with the – this whole lamentable affair!"

The silence in which he and Hastings regarded each other was broken by Arthur Sloane's querulous words:

"Why – why, in the name of all the inscrutable saints, this thing should have happened at Sloanehurst, is more than I can say! Jumping angels! Now, let me tell you what I – "

He stopped, hearing light footfalls coming down the hall. There was the swish of silk, a little outcry half-repressed, and Lucille Sloane stood in the doorway. One hand was at her breast, the other against the door-frame, to steady her tall, slightly swaying figure. Her hair, a pyramid on her head, as if the black, heavy masses of it had been done by hurrying fingers, gave to her unusual beauty now an added suggestion of dignity.

Profoundly moved as she was, there was nothing of the distracted or the inadequate about her. Hastings, who had admired her earlier in the evening, saw that her poise was far from overthrown. It seemed to him that she even had considered how to wear with extraordinary effect the brilliant, vari-coloured kimono draped about her. The only criticism of her possible was that, perhaps, she seemed a trifle too imperious – but, for his

part, he liked that.

"A thoroughbred!" he catalogued her, mentally.

"You will excuse me, father," she said from the doorway, "but I couldn't help hearing." She thrust forward her chin. "Oh, I had to hear! – And there's something I have to tell."

Her glance went at last from Sloane to Hastings as she advanced slowly into the room.

The detective pushed forward a chair for her.

"That's fine, Miss Sloane," he assured her. "I'm sure you're going to help us."

"It isn't much," she qualified, "but I think it's important."

Still she looked at neither Berne Webster nor Judge Wilton. And only a man trained as Hastings was to keenness of observation would have seen the slight but incessant tremour of her fingers and the constant, convulsive play of the muscles under the light covering of her black silk slippers.

Sloane, alone, had remained seated. She was looking up to Hastings, who stood several feet in front of Webster and the judge.

"I had gone to sleep," she said, her voice low, but musical and clear. "I waked up when I heard father moving about – his room is directly under mine; and, now that Aunt Lucy is away, I'm always more or less anxious about him. And I knew he had got quiet earlier, gone to sleep. It wasn't like him to be awake again so soon.

"I sprang out of bed, really very quickly. I listened for a few

seconds, but there was no further sound in father's room. The night was unusually quiet. There wasn't a sound – at first. Then I heard something. It was like somebody running, running very fast, outside, on the grass."

She paused. Hastings was struck by her air of alertness, or of prepared waiting, of readiness for questions.

"Which way did the footsteps go?" he asked.

"From the house – down the slope, toward the little gate that opens on the road."

"Then what?"

"I wondered idly what it meant, but it made no serious impression on me. I listened again for sounds in father's room. There was none. Struck again by the heavy silence – it was almost oppressive, coming after the rain – I went to the window. I stood there, I don't know how long. I think I was day-dreaming, lazily running things over in my mind. I don't think it was very long.

"And then father turned on the light in his room." She made a quick gesture with her left hand, wonderfully expressive of shock. "I shall never forget that! The long, narrow panel of light reached out into the dark like an ugly, yellow arm – reached out just far enough to touch and lay hold of the picture there on the grass; a woman lying on the drenched ground, her face up, and bending over her Judge Wilton and Berne – Mr. Webster.

"I knew she'd been hurt dreadfully; her feet were drawn up, her knees high; and I could see the looks of horror on the men's faces."

She paused, giving all her strength to the effort to retain her self-control before the assailing memory of what she had seen.

"That was all, Miss Sloane?" the detective prompted, in a kindly tone.

"Yes, quite," she said. "But I'd heard Berne's – what he was saying to you – and the judge's description of what they'd seen; and I thought you would like to know of the footsteps I'd heard – because they were the murderer's; they must have been. I knew it was important, most important."

"You were entirely right," he agreed warmly. "Thank you, very much."

He went the length of the room and halted by one of the bookcases, a weird, lumpy old figure among the shadows in the corner. He was scraping his cheek with his thumb, and looking at the ceiling, over the rims of his spectacles.

Arthur Sloane sighed his impatience.

"Those knees drawn up," Hastings said at last; "I was just thinking. They weren't drawn up when I saw the body. Were they?"

"We'd straightened the limbs," Webster answered. "Thought I'd mentioned that."

"No. – Then, there might have been a struggle? You think the woman had put up a fight – for her life? – and was overpowered?"

"Well," deliberated Webster, "perhaps; even probably."

"Strange," commented the detective, equally deliberate. "I hadn't thought so. I would have said she'd been struck down

unawares – without the slightest warning."

IV
HASTINGS IS RETAINED

Arrival of the officials, Sheriff Crown and the coroner, Dr. Garnet, brought the conference to an abrupt close. Hastings, seeing the look in the girl's eyes, left the library in advance of the other men. Lucille followed him immediately.

"Mr. Hastings!"

"Yes, Miss Sloane?"

He turned and faced her.

"I must talk to you, alone. Won't you come in here?"

She preceded him into the parlour across the hall. When he put his hand on the electric switch, she objected, saying she preferred to be without the lights. He obeyed her. The glow from the hall was strong enough to show him the play of her features – which was what he wanted.

They sat facing each other, directly under the chandelier in the middle of the spacious room. He thought she had chosen that place to avoid all danger of being overheard in any direction. He saw, too, that she was hesitant, half-regretting having brought him there. He read her doubts, saw how pain and anxiety mingled in her wide-open grey eyes.

"Yes, I know," he said with a smile that was reassuring; "I don't look like a particularly helpful old party, do I?"

He liked her more and more. In presence of mind, he reflected, she surpassed the men of the household. In spite of the agitation that still kept her hands trembling and gave her that odd look of fighting desperately to hold herself together, she had formed a plan which she was on the point of disclosing to him.

Her courage impressed him tremendously. And, divining what her request would be, he made up his mind to help her.

"It's not that," she said, her lips twisting to the pretence of a smile. "I know your reputation – how brilliant you are. I was thinking you might not understand what I wanted to say."

"Try me," he encouraged. "I'm not that old!"

It occurred to him that she referred to Berne Webster and herself, fearing, perhaps, his lack of sympathy for a love affair.

"It's this," she began a rush of words, putting away all reluctance: "I think I realize more keenly than father how disagreeable this awful thing is going to be – the publicity, the newspapers, the questions, the photographs. I know, too, that Mr. Webster's in an unpleasant situation. I heard what he said to you in the library, every word of it. – But I don't have to think about him so much as about my father. He's a very sick man, Mr. Hastings. The shock of this, the resultant shocks lasting through days and weeks, may be fatal for him.

"Besides," she explained, attaining greater composure, "he is so nervous, so impatient of discomfort and irritating things, that he may bring upon himself the enmity of the authorities, the investigators. He may easily provoke them so that they would do

anything to annoy him.

"I see you don't understand!" she lamented suddenly, turning her head away a little.

He could see how her lips trembled, as if she held them together only by immense resolution.

"I think I do," he contradicted kindly. "You want my help; isn't that it?"

"Yes." She looked at him again, with a quick turn of her head, her eyes less wide-open while she searched his face. "I want to employ you. Can't I – what do they call it? – retain you?"

"To do what, exactly?"

"Oh-h-h!" The exclamation had the hint of a sob in it; she was close to the end of her strength. "I'm a little uncertain about that. Can't you help me there? I want the real criminal found soon, immediately, as soon as possible. I want you to work on that. And, in the meantime, I want you to protect us – father – do things so that we shan't be overrun by reporters and detectives, all the dreadful results of the discovery of a murder at our very front door."

He was thoughtful, looking into her eyes.

"The fee is of no matter, the amount of it," she added impulsively.

"I wasn't thinking of that – although, of course, I don't despise fees. You see, the authorities, the sheriff, might not want my assistance, as you call it. Generally, they don't. They look upon it as interference and meddling."

"Still, you can work independently – retained by Mr. Arthur Sloane – can't you?"

He studied her further. For her age – hardly more than twenty-two – she was strikingly mature of face, and self-reliant. She had, he concluded, unusual strength of purpose; she was capable of large emotionalism, but mere feeling would never cloud her mind.

"Yes," he answered her; "I can do that. I will."

"Ah," she breathed, some of the tenseness going out of her, "you are very good!"

"And you will help me, of course."

"Of course."

"You can do so now," he pressed this point. "Why is it that all of you – I noticed it in the men in the library, and when we were outside, on the lawn – why is it that all of you think this crime is going to hit you, one of you, so hard? You seem to acknowledge in advance the guilt of one of you."

"Aren't you mistaken about that?"

"No. It struck me forcibly. Didn't you feel it? Don't you, now?"

"Why, no!"

He was certain that she was not frank with him.

"You mean," she added quickly, eyes narrowed, "I suspect – actually suspect some one in this house?"

In his turn, he was non-committal, retorting:

"Don't you?"

She resented his insistence.

"There is only one idea possible, I think," she declared, rising: "the footsteps that I heard fled from the house, not into it. The murderer is not here."

He stood up, holding her gaze.

"I'm your representative now, Miss Sloane," he said, his manner fatherly in its solicitude. "My duty is to save you, and yours, in every way I can – without breaking the law. You realize what my job is – do you?"

"Yes, Mr. Hastings."

"And the advisability, the necessity, of utter frankness between us?"

"Yes." She said that with obvious impatience.

"So," he persisted, "you understand my motive in asking you now: is there nothing more you can tell me – of what you heard and saw, when you were at your window?"

"Nothing – absolutely," she said, again obviously annoyed.

He was close to a refusal to have anything to do with the case. He was sure that she did not deal openly with him. He tried again:

"Nothing more, Miss Sloane? Think, please. Nothing to make you, us, more suspicious of Mr. Webster?"

"Suspect Berne!"

This time she was frank, he saw at once. The idea of the young lawyer's guilt struck her as out of the question. Her confidence in that was genuine, unalloyed. It was so emphatic that it surprised him. Why, then, this anxiety which had driven her to him for help? What caused the fear which, at the beginning of their

interview, had been so apparent?

He thought with great rapidity, turning the thing over in his mind as he stood confronting her. If she did not suspect Webster, whom did she suspect? Her father?

That was it! – her father!

The discovery astounded Hastings – and appealed to his sympathy, tremendously.

"My poor child!" he said, on the warm impulse of his compassion.

She chose to disregard the tone he had used. She took a step toward the door, and paused, to see that he followed her.

He went nearer to her, to conclude what he had wanted to say:

"I shall rely on this agreement between us: I can come to you on any point that occurs to me? You will give me anything, and all the things, that may come to your knowledge as the investigation proceeds? Is it a bargain, Miss Sloane?"

"A bargain, Mr. Hastings," she assented. "I appreciate, as well as you do, the need of fair dealing between us. Anything else would be foolish."

"Fine! That's great, Miss Sloane!" He was still sorry for her. "Now, let me be sure, once for all: you're concealing nothing from me, no little thing even, on the theory that it would be of no use to me and, therefore, not worth discussing? You told us all you knew – in the library?"

She moved toward the door to the hall again.

"Yes, Mr. Hastings – and I'm at your service altogether."

He would have sworn that she was not telling the truth. This time, however, he had no thought of declining connection with the case. His compassion for her had grown.

Besides, her fear of her father's implication in the affair – was there foundation for it, more foundation than the hasty thought of a daughter still labouring under the effects of a great shock? He thought of Sloane, effeminate, shrill of voice, a trembling wreck, long ago a self-confessed ineffective in the battle of life – he, a murderer; he, capable of forceful action of any kind? It seemed impossible.

But the old man kept that idea to himself, and instructed Lucille.

"Then," he said, "you must leave things to me. Tell your father so. Tomorrow, for instance – rather this morning, for it's already a new day – reporters will come out here, and detectives, and the sheriff. All of them will want to question you, your father, all the members of the household. Refer them to me, if you care to.

"If you discuss theories and possibilities, you will only make trouble. To the sheriff, and anybody representing him, state the facts, the bare facts – that's all. May I count on you for that?"

"Certainly. That's why I've em – why I want your help: to avoid all the unpleasantness possible."

When she left him to go to her father's room, Hastings joined the group on the front verandah. Sheriff Crown and Dr. Garnet had already viewed the body.

"I'll hold the inquest at ten tomorrow morning, rather this

morning," the coroner said. "That's hurrying things a little, but I'll have a jury here by then. They have to see the body before it's taken to Washington."

"Besides," observed the sheriff, "nearly all the necessary witnesses are here in this house party."

Aware of the Hastings fame, he drew the old man to one side.

"I'm going into Washington," he announced, "to see this Mrs. Brace, the girl's mother. Webster says she has a flat, up on Fourteenth street there. Good idea, ain't it?"

"Excellent," assured Hastings, and put in a suggestion: "You've heard of the fleeting footsteps Miss Sloane reported?"

"Yes. I thought Mrs. Brace might tell me who that could have been – some fellow jealous of the girl, I'll bet."

The sheriff, who was a tall, lanky man with a high, hooked nose and a pointed chin that looked like a large knuckle, had a habit of thrusting forward his upper lip to emphasize his words. He thrust it forward now, making his bristly, close-cropped red moustache stand out from his face like the quills of a porcupine.

"I'd thought of that – all that," he continued. "Looks like a simple case to me – very."

"It may be," said Hastings, sure now that Crown would not suggest their working together.

"Also," the sheriff told him, "I'll take this."

He held out the crude weapon with which, apparently, the murder had been committed. It was a dagger consisting of a sharpened nail file, about three inches long, driven into a roughly

rounded piece of wood. This wooden handle was a little more than four inches in length and two inches thick. Hastings, giving it careful examination, commented:

"He shaped that handle with a pocket-knife. Then, he drove the butt-end of the nail file into it. Next, he sharpened the end of the file – put a razor edge on it. – Where did you get this, Mr. Crown?"

"A servant, one of the coloured women, picked it up as I came in. You were still in the library."

"Where was it?"

"About fifteen or twenty feet from the body. She stumbled on it, in the grass. Ugly thing, sure!"

"Yes," Hastings said, preoccupied, and added: "Let me have it again."

He took off his spectacles and, screwing into his right eye a jeweller's glass, studied it for several minutes. If he made an important discovery, he did not communicate it to Crown.

"It made an ugly hole," was all he said.

"You see the blood on it?" Crown prompted.

"Oh, yes; lucky the rain stopped when it did."

"When did it stop – out here?" Crown inquired.

"About eleven; a few minutes after I'd gone up to bed."

"So she was killed between eleven and midnight?"

"No doubt about that. Her hat had fallen from her head and was bottom up beside her. The inside of the crown and all the lower brim was dry as a bone, while the outside, even where it

did not touch the wet grass, was wet. That showed there wasn't any rain after she was struck down."

The sheriff was impressed by the other's keenness of observation.

"That's so," he said. "I hadn't noticed it."

He sought the detective's opinion.

"Mr. Hastings, you've just heard the stories of everybody here. Do me a favour, will you? Is it worth while for me to go into Washington? Tell me: do you think anybody here at Sloanehurst is responsible for this murder?"

"Mr. Crown," the old man answered, "there's no proof that anybody here killed that woman."

"Just what I thought," Mr. Crown applauded himself. "Glad you agree with me. It'll turn out a simple case. Wish it wouldn't. Nominating primary's coming on in less than a month. I'd get a lot more votes if I ran down a mysterious fellow, solved a tough problem."

He strode down the porch steps and out to his car – for the ten-mile run into Washington. Hastings was strongly tempted to accompany him, even without being invited; it would mean much to be present when the mother first heard of her daughter's death.

But he had other and, he thought, more important work to do. Moving so quietly that his footsteps made no sound, he gained the staircase in the hall and made his way to the second floor. If anybody had seen him and inquired what he intended to do, he would have explained that he was on his way to get his own

coat in place of the one which young Webster had, with striking thoughtfulness, thrown over him.

As a matter of fact, his real purpose was to search Webster's room.

But experience had long since imbued him with contempt for the obvious. Secure from interruption, since his fellow-guests were still in the library, he did not content himself with his hawk-like scrutiny of the one room; he explored the back stairway which had been Webster's exit to the lawn, Judge Wilton's room, and his own.

In the last stage of the search he encountered his greatest surprise. Looking under his own bed by the light of a pocket torch, he found that one of the six slats had been removed from its place and laid cross-ways upon the other five. The reason for this was apparent; it had been shortened by between four and five inches.

"Cut off with a pocket-knife," the old man mused; "crude work, like the shaping of the handle of that dagger – downstairs; same wood, too. And in my room, from my bed —

"I wonder – "

With a low whistle, expressive of incredulity, he put that new theory from him and went down to the library.

V
THE INTERVIEW WITH MRS. BRACE

Gratified, and yet puzzled, by the results of his search of the upstairs rooms, Hastings was fully awake to the necessity of his interviewing Mrs. Brace as soon as possible. Lally, the chauffeur, drove him back to Washington early that Sunday morning. It was characteristic of the old man that, as they went down the driveway, he looked back at Sloanehurst and felt keenly the sufferings of the people under its roof.

He was particularly drawn to Lucille Sloane, with whom he had had a second brief conference. While waiting for his coffee – nobody in the house had felt like breakfast – he had taken a chair at the southeast end of the front porch and, pulling a piece of soft wood and a knife from his Gargantuan coat-pockets, had fallen to whittling and thinking. – Whittling, he often said, enabled him to think clearly; it was to him what tobacco was to other men.

Thus absorbed, he suddenly heard Lucille's voice, low and tense:

"We'll have to leave it as it was be – "

Berne Webster interrupted her, a grain of bitterness in his words:

"Rather an unusual request, don't you think?"

"I wanted to tell you this after the talk in the library," she continued, "but there – "

They had approached Hastings from the south side of the house and, hidden from him by the verandah railing, were upon him before he could make his presence known. Now, however, he did so, warning them by standing up with a clamorous scraping of his feet on the floor. Instinctively, he had recoiled from overhearing their discussion of what was, he thought, a love-affair topic.

Lucille hurried to him, not that she had additional information to give him, but to renew her courage. Having called upon him for aid, she had in the usual feminine way decided to make her reliance upon him complete. And, under the influence of his reassuring kindliness, her hesitance and misgivings disappeared.

He had judged her feelings correctly during their conference in the parlour. At dinner, she had seen in him merely a pleasant, quiet-spoken old man, a typical "hick" farmer, who wore baggy, absurdly large clothing – "for the sake of his circulation," he said – and whose appearance in no way corresponded to his reputation as a learned psychologist and investigator of crime. Now, however, she responded warmly to his charm, felt the sincerity of his sympathy.

Seeing that she looked up to him, he enjoyed encouraging her, was bound more firmly to her interests.

"I think your fears are unfounded," he told her.

But he did not reveal his knowledge that she suspected her

father of some connection with the murder. In fact, he could not decide what her suspicion was exactly, whether it was that he had been guilty of the crime or that he had guilty knowledge of it.

A little anxious, she had asked him to promise that he would be back by ten o'clock, for the inquest. He thought he could do that, although he had persuaded the coroner that his evidence would not be necessary – the judge and Webster had found the body; their stories would establish the essential facts.

"Why do you want me here then?" he asked, not comprehending her uneasiness.

"For one thing," she said, "I want you to talk to father – before the inquest. I wish you could now, but he isn't up."

It was eight o'clock when Miss Davis, telephone operator in the cheap apartment house on Fourteenth street known as The Walman, took the old man's card and read the inscription, over the wire:

"'Mr. Jefferson Hastings.'"

After a brief pause, she told him:

"She wants to know if you are a detective."

"Tell her I am."

"You may go up," the girl reported. "It's Number Forty-three, fourth floor – no elevator."

After ascending the three flights of stairs, he sat down on the top step, to get his breath. Mr. Hastings was stout, not to say sebaceous – and he proposed to begin the interview unhandicapped.

Mrs. Brace answered his ring. There was nobody else in the apartment. The moment he looked into her restless, remarkably brilliant black eyes, he catalogued her as cold and repellent.

"One of the swift-eyed kind," he thought; "heart as hard as her head. No blood in her – but smart. Smart!"

He relied, without question, on his ability to "size up" people at first glance. It was a gift with him, like the intuition of women; and to it, he thought, he owed his best work as a detective.

Mrs. Brace, without speaking, without acknowledging his quiet "Mrs. Brace, I believe?" led him into the living room after waiting for him to close the entrance door. This room was unusually large, out of proportion to the rest of the apartment which included, in addition to the narrow entry, a bedroom, kitchen and bath – all, so far as his observation went, sparsely and cheaply furnished.

They sat down, and still she did not speak, but studied his face. He got the impression that she considered all men her enemies and sought some intimation of what his hostility would be like.

"I'm sorry to trouble you at such a time," he began. "I shall be as brief as possible."

Her black eyebrows moved upward, in curious interrogation. They were almost mephistophelian, and unpleasantly noticeable, drawn thus nearer to the wide wave of her white hair.

"You wanted to see me – about my daughter?"

Her voice was harsh, metallic, free of emotion. There was nothing about her indicative of grief. She did not look as if she

had been weeping. He could learn nothing from her manner; it was extremely matter-of-fact, and chilly. Only, in her eyes he saw suspicion – perhaps, he reflected, suspicion was always in her eyes.

Her composure amazed him.

"Yes," he replied gently; "if I don't distress you – "

"What is it?"

She suddenly lowered her eyebrows, drew them together until they were a straight line at the bottom of her forehead.

Her cold self-possession made it easy, in fact necessary, for him to deal with facts directly. Apparently, she resented his intimated condolence. He could fling any statement, however sensational, against the wall of her indifference. She was, he decided, as free of feeling as she was inscrutable. She would be surprised by emotion into nothing. It was his brain against hers.

"I want to say first," he continued, "that my only concern, outside of my natural and very real sympathy with such a loss as yours must be, is to find the man who killed her."

She moved slowly to and fro on the armless, low-backed rocker, watching him intently.

"Will you help me?"

"If I can."

"Thank you," he said, smiling encouragement from force of habit, not because he expected to arouse any spirit of cooperation in her. "I may ask you a few questions then?"

"Certainly."

Her thin nostrils dilated once, quickly, and somehow their motion suggested the beginning of a ridiculing smile. He went seriously to work.

"Have you any idea, Mrs. Brace, as to who killed your daughter – or could have wanted to kill her?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

She got up, without the least change of expression, without a word, and, as she crossed the room, paused at the little table against the farther wall to arrange more symmetrically a pile of finger-worn periodicals. She went through the communicating door into the bedroom, and, from where he sat, he could see her go through another door – into the bathroom, he guessed. In a moment, he heard a glass clink against a faucet. She had gone for a drink of water, to moisten her throat, like an orator preparing to deliver an address.

She came back, unhurried, imperturbable, and sat down again in the armless rocker before she answered his question. So far as her manner might indicate, there had been no interruption of the conversation.

He swept her with wondering eyes. She was not playing a part, not concealing sorrow. The straight, hard lines of her lean figure were a complement to her gleaming, unrevealing eyes. There was hardness about her, and in her, everywhere.

A slow, warm breeze brought through the curtainless window a disagreeable odour, sour and fetid. The apartment was at the

back of the building; the odour came from a littered courtyard, a conglomeration of wet ashes, neglected garbage, little filthy pools, warmed into activity by the sun, high enough now to touch them. He could see the picture without looking – and that odour struck him as excruciatingly appropriate to this woman's soul.

"Berne Webster killed my daughter," she said evenly, hands moveless in her lap. "There are several reasons for my saying so. Mildred was his stenographer for eight months, and he fell in love with her – that was the way he described his feeling, and intention, toward her. The usual thing happened; he discharged her two weeks ago.

"He wants to marry money. You know about that, I take it – Miss Sloane, daughter of A. B. Sloane, Sloanehurst, where she was murdered. They're engaged. At least, that is – was Mildred's information, although the engagement hasn't been announced, formally. Fact is, he has to marry the Sloane girl."

Her thin, mobile lips curled upward at the ends and looked a little thicker, giving an exaggerated impression of wetness. Hastings thought of some small, feline animal, creeping, anticipating prey – a sort of calculating ferocity.

She talked like a person bent on making every statement perfectly clear and understandable. There was no intimation that she was so communicative because she thought she was obliged to talk. On the contrary, she welcomed the chance to give him the story.

"Have you told all this to that sheriff, Mr. Crown?" he

inquired.

"Yes; but he seemed to attach no importance to it."

She coloured her words with feeling at last – it was contempt – putting the sheriff beyond the pale of further consideration.

"You were saying Mr. Webster had to marry Miss Sloane. What do you mean by that, Mrs. Brace?"

"Money reasons. He had to have money. His bank balance is never more than a thousand dollars. He's got to produce sixty-five thousand dollars by the seventh of next September. This is the sixteenth of July. Where is he to get all that? He's got to marry it."

Hastings put more intensity into his scrutiny of her smooth, untroubled face. It showed no sudden access of hatred, no unreasoning venom, except that the general cast of her features spoke generally of vindictiveness. She was, unmistakably, sure of what she said.

"How do you know that?" he asked, hiding his surprise.

"Mildred knew it – naturally, from working in his office."

"Let me be exact, Mrs. Brace. Your charge is just what?"

He felt the need of keen thought. He reached for his knife and piece of wood. Entirely unconsciously, he began to whittle, letting little shavings fall on the bare floor. She made no sign of seeing his new occupation.

"It's plain enough, Mr. – I don't recall your name."

"Hastings – Jefferson Hastings."

"It's plain and direct, Mr. Hastings. He threw her over, threw

Mildred over. She refused to be dealt with in that way. He wouldn't listen to her side, her arguments, her protests, her pleas. She pursued him; and last night he killed her. I understand – Mr. Crown told me – he was found bending over the body – it seemed to me, caught in the very commission of the crime."

A fleeting contortion, like mirthless ridicule, touched her lips as she saw him, with head lowered, cut more savagely into the piece of wood. She noticed, and enjoyed, his dismay.

"That isn't quite accurate," he said, without lifting his head. "He and another man, Judge Wilton, stumbled – came upon your daughter's body at the same moment."

"Was that it?" she retorted, unbelieving.

When he looked up, she was regarding him thoughtfully, the black brows elevated, interrogative. The old man felt the stirrings of physical nausea within him. But he waited for her to elaborate her story.

"Do you care to ask anything more?" she inquired, impersonal as ashes.

"If I may."

"Why, certainly."

He paused in his whittling, brought forth a huge handkerchief, passed it across his forehead, was aware for a moment that he was working hard against the woman's unnatural calmness, and feeling the heat intensely. She was untouched by it. He whittled again, asking her:

"You a native of Washington?"

"No."

"How long have you been here?"

"About nine months. We came from Chicago."

"Any friends here – have you any friends here?"

"Neither here nor elsewhere." She made that bleak declaration simply, as if he had suggested her possession of green diamonds. Her tone made friendship a myth.

He felt again utterly free of the restraints and little hesitancies usual in situations of this nature.

"And your means, resources. Any, Mrs. Brace?"

"None – except my daughter's."

He was unaccountably restless. Putting the knife into his pocket, he stood up, went to the window. His guess had been correct. The courtyard below was as he had pictured it. He stood there at least a full minute.

Turning suddenly in the hope of catching some new expression on her face, he found her gazing steadily, as if in revery, at the opposite wall.

"One thing more, Mrs. Brace: did you know your daughter intended to go to Sloanehurst last night?"

"No."

"Were you uneasy when she failed to come in – last night?"

"Yes; but what could I do?"

"Had she written to Mr. Webster recently?"

"Yes; I think so."

"You think so?"

"Yes; she went out to mail a letter night before last. I recall that she said it was important, had to be in the box for the midnight collection, to reach its destination yesterday afternoon – late. I'm sure it was to Webster."

"Did you see the address on it?"

"I didn't try to."

He stepped from the window, to throw the full glare of the morning sky on her face, which was upturned, toward him.

"Was it in a grey envelope?"

"Yes; an oblong, grey envelope," she said, the impassive, unwrinkled face unmoved to either curiosity or reticence.

With surprising swiftness he took a triangular piece of paper from his breast pocket and held it before her.

"Might that be the flap of that grey envelope?"

She inspected it, while he kept hold of it.

"Very possibly."

Without leaving her chair, she turned and put back the lid of a rickety little desk in the corner immediately behind her. There, she showed him, was a bundle of grey envelopes, the corresponding paper beside it. He compared the envelope flaps with the one he had brought. They were identical.

Here was support of her assertion that Berne Webster had been pursued by her daughter as late as yesterday afternoon – and, therefore, might have been provoked into desperate action. He had found that scrap of grey paper at Sloanehurst, in Webster's room.

VI
ACTION BY THE SHERIFF

Mrs. Brace did not ask Hastings where he had got the fragment of grey envelope. She made no comment whatever.

He reversed the flap in his hand and showed her the inner side on which were, at first sight, meaningless lines and little smears. He explained that the letter must have been put into the envelope when the ink was still undried on the part of it that came in contact with the flap, and, the paper being of that rough-finish, spongy kind frequently affected by women, the flap had absorbed the undried ink pressed against it.

"Have you a hand-mirror?" he asked, breaking a long pause.

She brought one from the bedroom. Holding it before the envelope flap, he showed her the marks thus made legible. They were, on the first line: " – edly de – ," with the first loop or curve of an "n" or an "m" following the "de"; and on the second line the one word "Pursuit!" the whole reproduction being this:

Pursuit!

"Does that writing mean anything to you, Mrs. Brace?" Hastings asked, keeping it in front of her.

She moved her left hand, a quiet gesture indicating her lack of further interest in the piece of paper.

"Nothing special," she said, "except that the top line seems to bear out what I've told you. It might be: 'repeatedly demanded' – I mean Mildred may have written that she had repeatedly demanded justice of him, something of that sort."

"Is it your daughter's writing?"

"Yes."

"And the word 'Pursuit,' with an exclamation point after it? That suggest anything to you?"

"Why, no." She showed her first curiosity: "Where did you get that piece of envelope?"

"Not from Berne Webster," he said, smiling.

"I suppose not," she agreed, and did not press him for the information.

"You said," he went to another point, "that the sheriff attached no importance to your belief in Webster's guilt. Can you tell me

why?"

Her contempt was frank enough now, and visible, her lips thickening and assuming the abnormally humid appearance he had noticed before.

"He thinks the footsteps which Miss Sloane says she heard are the deciding evidence. He accuses a young man named Russell, Eugene Russell, who's been attentive to Mildred."

Hastings was relieved.

"Crown's seen him, seen Russell?" he asked, not troubling to conceal his eagerness.

On that, he saw the beginnings of wrath in her eyes. The black eyebrows went upward, the thin nostrils expanded, the lips set to a line no thicker than the edge of a knife.

"You, too, will – "

She broke off, checked by the ringing of the wall telephone in the entrance hall. She answered the call, moving without haste. It was for Mr. Hastings, she said, going back to her seat.

He regretted the interruption; it would give her time to regain the self-control she had been on the point of losing.

Sheriff Crown was at the other end of the wire. He was back at Sloanehurst, he explained, and Miss Sloane had asked him to give the detective certain information:

He had asked the Washington police to hold Eugene Russell, or to persuade him to attend the inquest at Sloanehurst. Crown, going in to Washington, had stopped at the car barns of the electric road which passed Sloanehurst, and had found a

conductor who had made the ten-thirty run last night. This conductor, Barton, had slept at the barns, waiting for the early-morning resumption of car service to take him to his home across the city.

Barton remembered having seen a man leave his car at Ridgecrest, the next stop before Sloanehurst, at twenty-five minutes past ten last night. He answered Russell's description, had seemed greatly agitated, and was unfamiliar with the stops on the line, having questioned Barton as to the distance between Ridgecrest and Sloanehurst. That was all the conductor had to tell.

"Mrs. Brace's description of Russell, a real estate salesman who had been attentive to her daughter," continued Crown, "tallied with Barton's description of the man who had been on his car. I got his address from her. But say! She don't fall for the idea that Russell's guilty! She gave me to understand, in that snaky, frozen way of hers, that I was a fool for thinking so.

"Anyway, I'm going to put him over the jumps!" The sheriff was highly elated. "What was he out here for last night if he wasn't jealous of the girl? Wasn't he following her? And, when he came up with her on the Sloanehurst lawn, didn't he kill her? It looks plain to me; simple. I told you it was a simple case!"

"Have you seen him?" Hastings was looking at his watch as he spoke – it was nine o'clock.

"No; I went to his boarding house, waked up the place at three o'clock this morning. He wasn't there."

Hastings asked for the number of the house. It was on Eleventh street, Crown informed him, and gave the number.

"I searched his room," the sheriff added, his voice self-congratulatory.

"Find anything?"

"I should say! The nail file was missing from his dressing case."

"What else?"

"A pair of wet shoes – muddy and wet."

"Then, he'd returned to his room, after the murder, and gone out again?"

"That's it – right."

"Anybody in the house hear him come in, or go out?"

"Not a soul. – And I don't know where he is now."

Hastings, leaving the telephone, found Mrs. Brace carefully brushing into a newspaper the litter made by his whittling. Her performance of that trivial task, the calm thoroughness with which she went about it, or the littleness of it, when compared with her complete indifference to the tragedy which should have overwhelmed her – something, he could not tell exactly what, made her more repugnant to him than ever.

He spoke impulsively:

"Did you want – didn't you feel some impulse, some desire, to go out there when you heard of this murder?"

She paused in her brushing, looking up to him without lifting herself from hands and knees.

"Why should I have wanted to do any such thing?" she replied. "Mildred's not out there. What's out there is – nothing."

"Do you know about the arrangements for the removal of the body?"

"The sheriff told me," she replied, cold, impersonal. "It will be brought to an undertaking establishment as soon as the coroner's jury has viewed it."

"Yes – at ten o'clock this morning."

She made no comment on that. He had brought up the disagreeable topic – one which would have been heart-breaking to any other mother he had ever known – in the hope of arousing some real feeling in her. And he had failed. Her self-control was impregnable. There was about her an atmosphere that was, in a sense, terrifying, something out of all nature.

She brushed up the remaining chips and shavings while he got his hat. He was deliberating: was there nothing more she could tell him? What could he hope to get from her except that which she wanted to tell? He was sure that she had spoken, in reply to each of his questions, according to a prearranged plan, a well designed scheme to bring into high relief anything that might incriminate Berne Webster.

And he was by no means in a mood to persuade himself of Webster's guilt. He knew the value of first impressions; and he did not propose to let her clog his thoughts with far-fetched deductions against the young lawyer.

She got to her feet with cat-like agility, and, to his

astonishment, burst into violent speech:

"You're standing there trying to think up things to help Berne Webster! Like the sheriff! Now, I'll tell you what I told him: Webster's guilty. I know it! He killed my daughter. He's a liar and a coward – a traitor! He killed her!"

There was no doubt of her emotion now. She stood in a strange attitude, leaning a little toward him in the upper part of her body, as if all her strength were consciously directed into her shoulders and neck. She seemed larger in her arms and shoulders; they, with her head and face, were, he thought, the most vivid part of her – an effect which she produced deliberately, to impress him.

Her whole body was not tremulous, but, rather, vibrant, a taut mechanism played on by the rage that possessed her. Her eyebrows, high on her forehead, reminded him of things that crawled. Her eyes, brilliant like clear ice with sunshine on it, were darting, furtive, always in motion.

She did not look him squarely in the eye, but her eyes selected and bored into every part of his face; her glance played on his countenance. He could easily have imagined that it burned him physically in many places.

"All this talk about Gene Russell's being guilty is stuff, bosh!" she continued. "Gene wouldn't hurt anybody. He couldn't! Wait until you see him!" Her lips curled momentarily to their thickened, wet sneer. "There's nothing to him – nothing! Mildred hated him; he bored her to death. Even I laughed at him. And this sheriff talks about the boy's having killed her!"

Suddenly, she partially controlled her fury. He saw her eyes contract to the gleam of a new idea. She was silent a moment, while her vibrant, tense body swayed in front of him almost imperceptibly.

When she spoke again, it was in her flat, constrained tone. He was impressed anew with her capacity for making her feeling subordinate to her intelligence.

"She's a dangerous woman," he thought again.

"You're working for Webster?"

Her inquiry came after so slight a pause, and it was put to him in a manner so different from the unrestraint of her denunciation of Webster, that he felt as he would have done if he had been dealing with two women.

"I've told you already," he said, "my only interest is in finding the real murderer. In that sense, I'm working for Webster – if he's innocent."

"But he didn't hire you?"

"No."

Seeing that he told the truth, she indulged herself in rage again. It was just that, Hastings thought; she took an actual, keen pleasure in giving vent to the anger that was in her. Relieved of the necessity of censoring her words and thoughts closely, she could say what she wanted to say.

"He's guilty, and I'll prove it!" she defied the detective's disbelief. "I'll help to prove it. Guilty? I tell you he is – guilty as hell!"

He made an abrupt departure, her shrill hatred ringing in his ears when he reached the street. He found it hard, too, to get her out of his eyes, even now – she had impressed herself so shockingly upon him. The picture of her floated in front of him, above the shimmering pavement, as if he still confronted her in all her unloveliness, the smooth, white face like a travesty on youth, the swift, darting eyes, the hard, straight lines of the lean figure, the cold deliberation of manner and movement.

"She's incapable of grief!" he thought. "Terrible! She's terrible!"

Lally drove him to his apartment on Fifteenth street, where the largest of three rooms served him as a combination library and office. There he kept his records, in a huge, old-fashioned safe; and there, also, he held his conferences, from time to time, with police chiefs and detectives from all parts of the country when they sought his help in their pursuit of criminals.

The walls were lined with books from floor to ceiling. A large table in the centre of the room was stacked high with newspapers and magazines. Dusty papers and books were piled, too, on several chairs set against the bookcases, and on the floor in one corner was a pyramid of documents.

"This place is like me," he explained to visitors; "it's loosely dressed."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.