The Door of Death

John Esteven

Title: The Door of Death
Date of first publication: 1928
Author: Samuel Shellabarger (as John Esteven) (1888-1954)
Date first posted: Aug. 6, 2020
Date last updated: Aug. 6, 2020
Faded Page eBook #20200810

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at https://www.pgdpcanada.net

The Door of Death

A Mystery Story

BY

JOHN ESTEVEN

The Century Co.
New York London

First printing July, 1928

PRINTED IN U. S. A.

To
LORNA DE' LUCCHI

CONTENTS

I Hallowe'en
II The Glove
III Testimony
IV Francis Ballion
V Certainty
VI Renaissance Studies
VII The Undertow
VIII "Unexpected Things"
IX Dead Men's Wine
X On My Own Responsibility
XI The Letter
XII "They Opened a Door"
XIII Donna È Mobile
XIV Medusa's Head
XV Blind Adders
XVI The Falcon
XVII Epilogue

The Door of Death

Chapter One

HALLOWE'EN

Looking back, it seems to me that even my first arrival at Greyhouse was shadowed by subterfuge, secrecy, and double-dealing, as if, at its threshold, I had been forced to assume a new and equivocal attitude. I recall the misgiving or rather timidity I felt on that autumn night, as I dressed for dinner in the stately guest-room assigned me. Numerous scruples and questions presented themselves, and the more I considered the nature of my position the less I liked it. Had it not been for my friendship with Eleanor Graham, I would have escaped even then—indeed, except for her and Carl Ballion, I should not have been there at all.

Night-time, together with silence and uncertainty, formed a cheerless prelude to the errand on which I had been summoned. I asked myself of what kind was the mental disorder of Celia Ballion, about which her sister wanted my opinion. To what obsession had Eleanor's letter referred? The vastness and country seclusion of the house, its hushed and shadowy spaces, seemed to render the presence of insanity here more ill-omened and sinister than in usual surroundings, as if its chill were spread along stairway and corridor. But used as I was by profession to various forms of psychopathy, it was not so much this that disturbed me, as the consciousness of being at Greyhouse under false pretenses.

Though ostensibly Eleanor's guest, I was actually an intruder. It did not set me at ease to reflect that I had been invited here in the absence of Celia's husband, Francis Ballion, and precisely because he *was* absent; nor to remember that, considering his wife's vagaries of no moment, he had refused bluntly to call in medical advice. It seemed to me that some reflection of him appeared in this house of his, in its remoteness and somber elegance, which implied a character aloof, self-complete, and intolerant of interference. On the other hand, his wife, of course, believed in the reality of her delusions, and would resent the scrutiny of a stranger. But finally, if there existed, as I had been led to believe, an estrangement between husband and wife, to which her condition might possibly be ascribed, here was I

dabbling unbidden in family matters, a course that might easily lead to deserved unpleasantness.

On dubious authority, then—namely that of Mrs. Ballion's sister and her brother-in-law, Carl Ballion—I formed part of an innocent conspiracy. But however praiseworthy the motive, I could have wished for a less ambiguous introduction to a strange household, and looked forward to the evening with considerable uneasiness.

To this, no doubt, my surroundings in part contributed. Although not as a rule impressionable, I felt, and I believe no one could have helped feeling, the individuality of Greyhouse, as distinguished from other places of the kind. It produced an almost haunting sense of the unusual, but for what reason was at first difficult to determine. The house was a modern American building, and I had seen other interiors arranged with a like regard for space and solidity of furnishing, indeed decorated in the same fashion of the cold and splendid Renaissance. The difference here was in what might be termed a discordance between the house and myself. Elsewhere, however slavishly a given period had been copied, I felt no actual illusion of the past. But here I stood, clearly alien and incongruous. It was in the completeness of this impression, free from any sense of the artificial, that I found the distinction of Greyhouse to consist; and because it was so complete, I felt lost, oppressed, overawed. The gilded pillars of the bed with its valance, the comfortable but solitary chairs, seemed scornfully impassive, as if they admitted no conceivable reason for intrusion. I might have been dressing for dinner in the Borgia apartments of the Vatican.

Eleanor Graham met me at the foot of the great stairs as I came down, and I could not help noting that what was true of me in my relation to the house did not seem to apply to her. I remained out of place in the brilliant spaciousness of the hall, while she seemed one with it.

Perhaps a sense of this difference, perhaps that I had forgotten how striking she was both in beauty and charm of presence, rendered our meeting a little more formal than in the past.

"I'm glad you are here," she said, "you can hardly realize how glad."

But at the same time her manner showed plainly that it was the physician rather than the friend she welcomed, and there remained for me nothing but to express the desire of being of service.

She drew me a little breathlessly toward the tall fireplace of carved gray marble.

“We have a few moments before Celia comes down. I should like to tell you what I know; then you can judge for yourself, but something must be done quickly. The last six months have made a marked difference.”

“Have you any idea,” I asked, “about the cause of your sister’s illness?”

But she countered with another question: “Did you see Carl Ballion, as I suggested in my letter? What did he say?”

“He was naturally reticent; but I gathered that his brother and sister-in-law have been on strained terms of late. He told me that Mr. Ballion is highly temperamental, at times inconsiderate, and that he has been in the habit of more or less frequent absences from Greyhouse.”

She nodded thoughtfully.

“Just as to-night—otherwise I could hardly have dared invite you. He ridicules Celia’s moods. Was that all Carl said?”

“Yes, except that he showed uneasiness about Mrs. Ballion’s condition. And so you think,” I went on, “that these relations with her husband are the cause of what you fear?”

She turned, holding out her hands toward the flames that curved around the logs before us.

“I believe so; but Celia does not. In his better moments, no one can be as devoted as Francis Ballion. Look at that painting there—did you ever see a more gallant man?”

The usual portrait leaves merely a blur on the mind; but even now after long years I can still recall vividly the one that Eleanor indicated at this moment—the bold, imperious face of Francis Ballion, the compelling eyes, the leonine head lifted in a sort of inalienable haughtiness, the dark, waving hair. His lips, however, were parted in a smile so gracious as to be lovable. I looked and the figure seemed to dilate, fill and give character to the hall, rendering its massiveness significant. He, at least, was at home and native here; in some mysterious sense, the room appeared an emanation of the painting.

“If he could only forget his pleasures,” she went on, “his studies, and collections, and remember his wife, that is, remember her a little more. But I repeat Celia does not connect her delusions with his change of temper or even with their disputes, although somehow I’m sure they center in him.”

“Of what nature,” I asked, “are these delusions?”

She glanced at the stairway before answering.

"Perhaps you would hardly call them so. She has the feeling that what you and I would consider solid, fixed—this wall, for instance, the things about us—is merely a figment, a veil shutting out the unknown. She imagines this veil to be parting, feels what she calls a breath from beyond, a tide closing in. She speaks of a phantom near us; and when I ask what phantom, tells me to look for myself."

It is curious that Eleanor's words had the effect of making the hall seem more silent, more brilliant, more oppressive. The light sound of a footstep in the corridor above startled me, as if it were a signal.

"Remember," she whispered, "remember that you were invited as my guest. Do not let her suspect you of watching her. She believes in her delusions."

With an odd thrill, I saw the figure of a woman descending the stairs; or, from our point of observation, it might well have seemed the figure of a child. That was my first impression of Celia Ballion; it has become the enduring one. She appeared so frail against her background. She instilled somehow the sense of aloneness, of being astray in an unfamiliar place. Her footstep was almost inaudible. Her hand fluttered along the heavy balustrade. I realized that I was not the only one incongruous here: the mistress of Greyhouse herself was still further removed from any personal connection with her environment.

From the outset, I could understand without sharing whatever indifference toward his wife existed on the part of Francis Ballion. I could understand because of his portrait which emphasized his abundant vitality. The woman before me, slight as porcelain, recalled an opposed breed, one of the race whose blood, grown thin, flows in disciplined channels, who is capable of devotion or sacrifice, but always with an after-sense of duty. One could imagine her voice becoming shrill, but never passionate. She exhibited, I thought, exactly those qualities of reserve which have become associated with New England tradition.

And yet, while admitting this, I was equally aware of her unusual charm. She exhaled, as it were, the fine aroma of distinguished manner, which accorded with the delicate chiseling of her features and exquisite grace of movement. I realized that one could love Celia Ballion as one loves the perfection of elegance, the nuance of a color, a remembered echo of music. She belonged to the domain of lovely and evasive perceptions.

We stood for a moment chatting, when doors at the end of the hall opened, and dinner was announced by a suave, handsome servant in dark livery. The dining-room, in keeping with the rest of the house, was of large dimensions and decorated in Venetian style. But the place, though warm, seemed cold. Our voices sounded thin and ineffectual. The rattle of fork or knife served, as it were, to punctuate habitual silence. And behind us flitted the attendant, lithe and noiseless, like a detached shadow.

At first, I could discover nothing strange in Mrs. Ballion's conversation. She talked easily on a number of topics, nor was it until I asked the apparently harmless question as to when Greyhouse had been built, that her answer unfolded what I had been led to expect.

"Hundreds of years ago," she said, "in evil days when there was no God."

She had spoken in a calm, emotionless voice. Without turning I felt the chill of Eleanor Graham's distress.

"Of course," she went on, "these walls were set up recently. But they are not Greyhouse. They are only the mask of Greyhouse, don't you understand?"

I made a rejoinder of some kind. We changed the subject; but gradually I became aware that as long as nothing connected with Greyhouse or the name of Ballion was mentioned, she spoke rationally, indeed charmingly; a single reference, however, to her husband or surroundings drew, as it were, a mental curtain between us. Even her brother-in-law, Carl Ballion, whom I knew and admired, seemed included in the same ban. I mentioned him with enthusiasm. For an instant she smiled.

"You know him? What do you think he is?"

"A gifted journalist," I answered, "a leader in politics, a man with a future."

"You forget his past." She broke into strange laughter. "How blind you are!" Then more calmly, "Oh, I admit his attractiveness, with that blood and name—but ask Eleanor rather than me to sing his praises."

At this, I saw that Eleanor Graham looked down, and there came to me the first twinge of disappointment, which proved clearly enough that last summer's friendship with her had ripened into something more. She spoke loyally now in defense of Carl Ballion as one who had been a friend to them both, and even put in a word for the house itself, which for her part she found beautiful and reproached her sister for undervaluing.

“Please!” interrupted the latter tensely. “You don’t understand, I hope, what its beauty means!”

Curious, I thought, the resemblance and the contrast between Mrs. Ballion and her sister. At first glance, they appeared totally unlike. Eleanor Graham’s hair was dark, her features bolder. She was tall and, though slender, every movement showed the development that comes with exercise and health. In all this Celia was the direct contrary. It was in an accent of speech or perhaps of thought, something quaint and gracious, that similarity began—in this, and the shade of Eleanor’s eyes, which were light as Celia Ballion’s, abnormally light in contrast to her hair, and recalled the uncertain color of aquamarine. But in hers burned youth at its height, whereas upon meeting the glance of Celia, there recurred strangely the thought of twilight in winter.

Afterward, we gathered once more about the fire, and at a nod from her sister Eleanor turned down the lights, so that we sat half in darkness, half facing the tumult of the flames.

“You see, I like it better this way,” remarked Celia. “A fire might be anywhere; it might be in our room at home when we were children. Besides, it’s a kind of magic circle where one feels safe.”

Impressed by her voice, I was unprepared for its excitement when she whispered suddenly: “If only *that* were not here! If I didn’t have to see that and remember. . .!”

Following her glance, I noticed for the first time an object to which she apparently referred. It was nothing more than a coat of arms carved in the slanting stone of the mantel above us, whereon was depicted a falcon poised at the zenith of his flight. The workmanship seemed to me peculiarly beautiful.

I should have done well to follow Eleanor’s lead implicitly, but badly inspired and in momentary forgetfulness a little later, I happened to inquire into what part of the house the doors opposite us at the far end of the hall opened. A reproachful glance warned me too late.

“They are locked,” replied Celia. “It’s the room where Francis keeps his library and collections. He has appropriate tastes. You will find there what he calls ‘the aids to eloquence’ ”—and when I looked a question—“Oh, I’d rather not explain. I heard *him* explain them once.” Her thin hands twisted about each other. After what seemed a long pause, she added, “You will find there also a Door of Death.”

Eleanor interrupted: “Remember, Celia, we have a guest. Won’t you try, dear, to avoid these subjects? It can’t be very pleasant for him.”

Fearing some kind of outburst, I hastened to affirm my interest—that, on the contrary, I was glad to hear of Mr. Ballion’s collection. But I was surprised at the docility with which my hostess accepted Eleanor’s rebuke.

“Of course,” she said. “And I wish Dr. Ames might find Greyhouse less *triste*. To-morrow,” she went on, “you will motor together. Then Carl will be here for lunch. Even Francis may be back,”—and in a slightly altered voice, “they know how to be pleasant!”

But do what we might, conversation languished. The silence that seemed native here asserted itself in ever longer pauses. And meanwhile from without—it seemed far off—we heard the howling of the autumn wind. It came in gusts, beating with spectral fingers on the panes. It called through emptiness, hurrying from the void to the void. Then suddenly I remembered it was Hallowe’en. They also had forgotten it.

Leaning toward me, Celia Ballion laid her hand on my knee.

“It’s the night of evil spirits. Do you believe in ghosts?” she asked earnestly, as a child might have asked.

I answered with a certain tremor that I did not, that I considered it a superstition long outlived.

“And I agree with you,” she said. “I do not believe in them, but in something else. The French have a better word: *revenants*, the ones who return.” Aware of Eleanor’s eyes, she stood up. “I’m going to my room. A *good* night, I hope, for all. No, I’ll find my way. You needn’t come.” For a moment she put her arms about Eleanor; then gave me her hand in a manner of simple, yet old-fashioned, courtesy; and afterward, stood looking at the fire before she turned away. I shall always remember her best as she moved slowly toward the stairs, a dim figure in the twilight of the hall.

For a while Eleanor Graham and I stood without speaking. Then in a small, dry voice she asked for my opinion.

“Doubtless I could find words,” I said, “to describe her ailment, but that wouldn’t explain its cause. She is clearly in mortal fear of something connected with her husband and this place. Therefore she must leave Greyhouse at once. It’s impossible to tell if this condition is permanent except on observation somewhere else.”

“But Francis might object. He has so little patience with weakness of any sort.”

I found it difficult to answer calmly, “Carl Ballion and I will persuade him.”

She made a gesture of despair.

“It’s incomprehensible. I find this house wonderful. It seemed strange at first, but I have grown to love it. And after all there are a number of men more thoughtless and quick-tempered than Francis Ballion. At heart, I’m sure he loves her. What is there to fear! Tell me, do you think her already insane?”

How easily in my office could I have found an answer! Here instead, in these strange surroundings, I was at a curious loss. What *is* insanity? The abnormal. But the difficulty consists in fixing a norm, the degree of variance permissible in drawing sharp the frontiers of sanity. At the moment I felt myself oddly on the defensive, resisting a thought that impugned my own soundness, an idea which intruded and returned: the absurd conviction, namely, that Celia Ballion was somehow peculiarly sane, that we instead were, as she insisted, blind. Topsyturvydom! An effect of this haunted night, an emergence of ancestral credulity which, of course, I rejected.

“At all events,” I told her, “your sister is not yet critically deranged. The crisis, however, must not come. If we can remove at once any danger of it, I believe surely that everything will be well.”

Vain predictions—more vain than that wind between the trees of Greyhouse, wailing and distraught, at its phantom chase of pursuer and pursued!

We retired early, but I found sleep difficult. Between snatches of slumber I woke for increasingly longer periods. Doubtless the gale blowing outside instilled something of its own unrest; but above all, I could not free myself from memories of the evening which continued to drift and pass again.

It was strange, I thought, that the problem of Celia Ballion should have taken such strong possession of me—a case, after all, among hundreds not dissimilar. If I could only rid myself of the impression that some truth, as yet concealed, lurked behind her apparent derangement—the instinctive sense of a solution almost within grasp. It was this that prevented sleep. It seemed to the overwrought alertness of fancy that here about me in the darkness

hovered, could I but understand it, a token, an intimation, some vague meaning incumbent on me to decipher.

The very luxuriousness of my bed gave rise to reflections upon Celia Ballion's position. Doubtless she slept in as spacious a room, on a bed as soft. That was all wealth could do; it could not shut out neglect or fear or madness. She and Eleanor had inherited a fortune; Francis Ballion had acquired another; and the result was Greyhouse, a monument to intelligence, art, and power, with space for every beauty save tenderness.

Tired of this medley of thought and aware that sleep was impossible, I got up at length and turned on the reading-lamp. It threw a dim light upon the room's grandeur; but this served rather to increase than lessen my cheerlessness; I felt lost in this uncompromising magnificence. A high mirror at the end of the room reflected me vaguely, spectrally. But movement was better than lying awake, and so I paced here and there, having thrown on a dressing-gown, for the night was turning cold.

And what a night—of wind that seemed to pass long-drawn, followed by silence; then again a cry, the swoop and surge of another blast. Parting the curtains, I caught sight of tree-tops bent grotesquely, like skeletons charged with a load. Somewhere below, a clock struck one. More wide awake than ever, I took up a book and read, but to this day I am unable to recall its subject. The clock struck two.

It must have been shortly after that, when of a sudden I leaned forward listening. There came in a lull between gusts of wind the sound, or rather shadow of a sound—which to faculties less abnormally intent would have remained inaudible—of footsteps outside my door, a soft tread heard rather by weight than impact, not unlike the padding of a beast. Simply a measured pace or two—then lost by reason of the storm outside.

So brief was the sound that I had difficulty in judging of its direction. My impression, however, was that it tended toward the left, an unfamiliar section of the house, where I vaguely imagined a back stairway. I listened carefully, but heard nothing further. It was presumably a servant entering late, or indeed I might have been mistaken as to hearing anything at all.

I had returned to my reading, when I became conscious, beyond doubt this time, that some one was astir. A door opened, a knob turned somewhere, then silence, and suddenly a rustle along the corridor. I was already opening when a sharp knock rang out on the other side of the panel, and I found myself face to face with Eleanor. Her dark dressing-gown and the obscurity of the hallway outlined her features sharply.

“Quick!” she said. “I thought I heard something . . . I went to Celia’s room. . .”

I was already outside and a moment later we stood on the threshold of a brilliantly lighted door. Upon the white expanse of the bed, under its great canopy, Celia Ballion looked so small and amazingly childlike. It needed only a glance to know that the figure outstretched before us was dead. She lay half on her side, so that we could not immediately see the face; but as we turned it, I heard a low cry from Eleanor Graham; and indeed it was scarcely credible that what last evening I had compared to the delicacy of a miniature should have become this mask. I whispered to Eleanor that she should leave the room for a while, she could do nothing, but she only moved back a few steps and stood leaning against the wall with wide, unseeing eyes.

The bedclothes had been a trifle disturbed, as if Celia had attempted to rise before sinking back, so that she was but half covered.

“Did you find her like this?” I asked.

Eleanor nodded.

“Did you notice anything unusual upon entering the room?”

“Nothing—except that it was fully lighted as it is now. As a rule Celia used only the bed-lamp.”

I looked up at a central chandelier which cast a rather harsh brilliance. It gave, however, excellent light for the examination I now made, and I asked again, “Was your sister in the habit of wearing a collar or necklace?”

“No—but what do you mean? Wasn’t it fear—perhaps a dream? You saw her condition.”

“Yes, there was fear,” I muttered. I felt at a loss for an answer. “You know, I may be wrong—it seems a strange thing to say—but I believe your sister died violently.”

“You mean. . .”

“Yes. She was murdered by strangling not two hours ago.”

Chapter Two

THE GLOVE

Let me here pay homage to the high spirit and self-control displayed by Eleanor Graham on this and other occasions of the grim adventure in which we were both destined to participate. Whatever her faults, they were not of weakness. She was one of those who meet the challenge of emergency like steel to flint, and are best appreciated in moments of stress. Now, white but rigid, she faced the situation, and in part took charge of the immediate steps necessary.

First, the servants were roused and the house searched, including the separate wing reserved for Mr. Ballion's collections, to which the locked doors communicated. But nothing gave evidence of any intruder. It appeared also that none of the servants, including the housemaids, a cook, and the man, Hasta, had been away from Greyhouse that evening. Frightened and incoherent, they all bore witness to this. When I asked if Mrs. Ballion locked the door of her room at night, Eleanor replied that she did not. There was an electric bell communicating with her own room in case Celia needed anything; and on this account the door was left unfastened.

"It's significant," I observed, "that she did not ring to-night."

"Yes," returned Eleanor, and I was aware of her constraint, "it's indeed significant."

"Mr. Ballion then does not occupy the same room as his wife?"

"No, he does not."

"There is nothing further we can do," I said, "but telephone him. I remember your mentioning, didn't you, that he was in town."

"Yes, for the theater. But," she hesitated a moment, her eyes avoiding me, "I'm not certain of his address. Perhaps Celia knew. He doesn't, as a rule, care to be disturbed by messages."

I remembered that Francis Ballion belonged to a number of clubs, where he might or might not be found. There were also a score of possible hotels, and it was not an hour of the night for telephoning at random.

"You might try Carl Ballion," suggested Eleanor, and gave me his number.

It was only after some minutes of prolonged ringing that a drowsy voice answered—a voice, however, sharpening suddenly. I could imagine the keen, handsome face of Ballion, as I had seen it yesterday, intent above the receiver. He greeted my report with subdued exclamations.

At length, "No, I don't know where Francis is. I'll try the Rackets Club. You suggest there was violence used—are you sure?"

"Practically."

"Then it's a question for the police. Though I don't know about that. Francis would hate publicity—in case, that is, you are mistaken. Perhaps we'd better wait—or no, what do you think of Norse?"

"Rae Norse?"

"Yes, of the detective service."

"Right!" I approved; "he's an intimate friend of ours and would be discreet."

"Then I'll find him and Francis, if possible," went on the quick, decisive voice. "At all events, I'll be at Greyhouse within an hour. Hope Eleanor's standing it. I can't tell you, Ames, how thankful I am you are there."

He was better than his word, but the time seemed long before a car with three men drove up to Greyhouse. At the sound of the horn, I had gone out to meet them. One was Carl Ballion, the other Norse, and the third a heavy-set man, who I learned was a subordinate of Norse's. Francis Ballion had not been found then. There seemed to me a shadow on Carl's face as he emerged into the light of the door.

Having been recently preoccupied with the portrait of his brother, I noticed for the first time a resemblance, the boldness of feature and grace of carriage; but Carl was younger and slightly taller. He gave the impression besides of the well-knit compactness of muscle that goes with an athlete. He had the most expressive eyes and mouth I have known, fairly instinct with energy and alertness of mind.

At first glance, the appearance of his companion was in direct contrast; and because a good part of this record deals necessarily with Rae Norse, it is worth pausing to look at him, as he stood near Ballion. He always reminded me, in a sort of droll combination, of two utterly opposed historical figures —John Paul Jones and the composer Mozart. He was slight and appeared delicate, but had a sort of game-cock independence in his way of carrying himself. Except in moments of action his manner was pensive, even languid.

At times I could imagine him dreaming mystically, and at others in a cocked hat on the quarterdeck. He was a person of most amazing variety, but I should say that the dominant trait was a look of girlish sensitiveness which has been the undoing of a great many. Having once at an athletic club boxed with Rae Norse, I never afterward let it deceive me.

"Good morning, Ames," he said, "I fancy you're glad we're here." The warmth of my assent evidently amused him, for he smiled expressively to Carl Ballion.

"How's Eleanor?" asked the latter; and when I had reassured him his face brightened. "We might as well go in," said Norse. "It's too dark for looking around outside. But you, Tom,"—this to the subordinate—"you watch the driveway and walks in front and about. Don't permit any one to confuse whatever footprints there are. And when it's light enough, make tracings of anything you find with note of position. You're good at that."

He entered the great hall in front of us, and looked about him. I could see that he also was impressed by its size and beauty. "A Sargent," he said, pointing at once to the portrait; "your brother, I believe?"

Carl nodded.

On fire with curiosity to hear the result of his search, I asked if Mr. Ballion had been found.

"Yes and no," he answered with a trace of concern. "He is stopping at the Rackets Club, but hadn't come in when I 'phoned." The effort at nonchalance in his voice seemed rather to emphasize than veil the fact that it was four in the morning.

Norse avoided the topic. "Before we go further," he said to me, "give us your account. And by the way, what is the name of that fellow who met us at the door?"

"Hasta," returned Carl.

"A Spanish name. . . All right, Ames, give us your story."

I told him what I considered salient in the chronicle of that long night, but all the while I saw that his eyes rested on the portrait; and all the while I would have thought that he scarcely heard, were it not that he asked me an occasional sharp question.

"You say that you considered her unbalanced?"

"Yes—but not insane."

“You believe then that the cause of her fear may have been real?”

“I’m perfectly uncertain on that point,” I said truthfully.

And again: “Miss Graham heard these footsteps you describe?”

“The sound was so brief that it was merely an impression on the part of both of us.”

“Two impressions,” mused Norse, “become impressive.”

And again: “Why do you believe death came by strangling rather than heart failure, due to some nervous attack? Be careful about this.”

I outlined the symptoms bluntly, though somewhat reproached by the horror in Carl Ballion’s face: the position of the tongue between the teeth, the slight protrusion of the eyes, ashen color of the skin, etc.

“But I thought,” interjected Carl, “that in such cases there was rather a suffusion of blood in the head.”

“Not necessarily,” I answered. “It may be one extreme or the other.”

“And her throat?” asked Norse.

“A slight mark, as from the tightness of a collar. It is hardly apparent now.”

“But surely,” insisted Ballion, “there would be more than that—some trace of fingers, or if a cord were used, a ridge beneath the skin.”

“No,” I maintained, “this would not inevitably occur if the strangling instrument were removed immediately after death, and provided this instrument were especially fitted to its purpose.”

“What do you mean?” asked Norse.

“I mean a contrivance which would exert sudden and violent torsion.”

“You believe such an instrument was used?”

“I do, and that whoever used it was an expert.”

“Very well then,” said Norse, “we can begin investigations.”

Carl Ballion, however, excused himself on the ground of wishing to see Eleanor; and once again, as he left us, I felt that droop of spirit which a person in my position had no right to call jealousy. It was I, therefore, and the butler, Hasta, as guides, who accompanied Norse on his inspection.

To my surprise, he did not immediately proceed to the fatal room. His movements may be described as a spiral, beginning at the widest circumference and gradually narrowing to a center. He first examined the various means of entering or leaving Greyhouse; asked questions about the front, or hall door, whose chains Eleanor and I had found correctly in place; visited the two service entrances and noted, as we had done, that each inside bolt of stout iron was driven deep in its socket. Every window fastening was also properly latched. We then turned our attention to the doors of the library.

I say doors advisedly, because they were double, each of massive oak and each with a separate key. They were kept locked during Mr. Ballion's absence, and their keys, of which he retained duplicates, were entrusted to his wife. It was with them (found, by the way, apparently unmolested in the drawer of her dressing-table) that we had opened the library during our first search.

This room, if it could be called one that more nearly resembled a medieval audience hall in height and size, seemed at first glance to be without other means of entrance than from the house. Constituting in itself an almost separate wing, it was lighted and ventilated from above very much in the manner of an enormous studio. Upon closer survey, however, a door, or rather crevice, was noticeable in the outer angle of the apartment, which opened evidently on the garden. I fancy that no exit more strange has ever been designed; for, apart from its situation as a section of the angle itself, apart also from its height and relative narrowness, this aperture could be used only to leave but not to enter the room.

So much was plain. The door was without knob and provided only with a keyhole. But when, upon not finding a key, Norse went outside and around, he discovered that the door on that side was blank.

"Now what," he mused on returning, "can be the use of it!"

He took out his pocket torch for a closer examination and threw a circle of light upon the threshold, bringing into prominence a slab of stone about three feet square, set even with the floor. On it was carved what appeared to be a woman's face. But what this symbolized remained as enigmatic as the rest.

"The door's always like that, sir," volunteered Hasta. "It's never been opened that I know of."

“It hasn’t?” returned Norse placidly, and bent down to look closer. “It hasn’t? Well, perhaps not.”

But evidently something puzzled him, for he turned to look again as we left the room.

There followed an inspection of the upper floors and particularly of the hall upon which my bedchamber opened, and which ended, as I had assumed, at a flight of service stairs.

Then only, when this was finished, did he enter Celia’s room, still brilliantly lighted as Eleanor and I had found it. She and Carl Ballion were standing by the bed when we rejoined them, his face unusually softened by a look of deep sorrow. He turned away. “She was a very lovely woman,” he said abruptly. “She could not have harmed any one. Poor, gentle Celia!”

At this moment I noticed a peculiarly seraphic expression on the features of Norse. Doubtless he was moved as I at the presence of tragedy; but of a sudden I grew conscious that his look centered on the figure of Hasta, who stood uncertain at the threshold. And if I have ever seen a distressful countenance, it was there. His eyes were on Eleanor and Ballion as they stood above the body. He had the appearance of one who would have liked to compose his features and cannot, whose mask is off. His face was putty-colored, his hands twitched. In another instant, he had stepped back again into the hall. Then I saw the seraphic-sensitive yield place in Norse’s eyes to a glint of cold steel.

He gave no other indication of his thought, however; but began a thorough examination of the room. I noticed that he gave particular attention to the bedposts and woodwork; but from the blankness of his face I judged that he had found nothing.

“We’ll have to wait,” he muttered, “for what Tom Roose may find outside—and also for daylight. There seems to be nothing here. Quite so,” he nodded in reply to a question from Eleanor, “you may cover the body.”

Now, whether it was that our search had neglected the drapings of the bed, or that it had been concealed beneath a fold, I do not know; but when Eleanor drew taut the covering, a dark object slipped to the floor which gave a new turn to affairs and became the essential link between that night and what followed. Eleanor, bravely absorbed in her ministrations, was unconscious of it; but hardly had it fallen before Norse with a sharp intentness had snatched it up. For a moment I did not recognize what he spread out on his hand beneath the light. Then I saw it was a glove, a man’s

glove of thick brownish leather. Mechanically he undid the clasp, for it was fastened, and spread open the cuff. I heard a quick intake of breath. By this time, Carl Ballion and I were at his side, and craning over we saw two initials stenciled within. They turned fiercely vivid.

The initials were: F. B.

In the revulsion that followed I felt sick, physically sick, as thought unleashed sprang to an apparent yet monstrous conclusion. The air of the room seemed foul and poisoned. I could read my own dismay reflected on the features of Ballion and of Eleanor, who now joined us. Only the face of Norse retained its usual calm, though I saw his lips tighten.

"So," he remarked, "and can any one tell me if he has ever seen a glove like this in the possession of Mr. Ballion?"

Neither Carl nor Eleanor answered.

"You don't have to speak," continued the other, "though obviously your silence means yes. You will have to testify later at all events."

It was Eleanor's voice that broke the pause. "Of course, there's no use putting off. He wears that kind. The glove is Francis Ballion's, I think." Then faintly: "I'm going to my room for a while. Would some one mind helping me? I believe. . ."

Then I realized fully how great her strength had been.

One of the servants, whom I knew later as Anne Roderick and long devoted both to her and Celia, took charge of Eleanor at the door of her room.

"She'll be right enough in a moment," whispered Anne. "She's like that; she never gives up."

But I confess that for me also the splendid, tapestried room had become terrible, and it was only the spur of pride that enabled me to return there with Carl Ballion.

We found Norse still examining the glove, his face more placid than ever.

"It's a most interesting thing," he observed, "a pearl of a thing! Apart from other remarkable features, it's curious that any one capable of such neat crime, who leaves not a trace, kills like an adept, should deposit a glove and initials, a calling-card, as it were, by the side of his victim. Almost too good to be true!"

But what the “other remarkable features” were, he did not vouchsafe.

There came a ringing of the telephone outside. Norse answered it, and I could hear his voice in brief conversation: “He’s there, eh? You’ve informed him? Very well.”

Upon reëntering, he met the question in Carl’s glance. “Your brother’s just returned to his club. He’ll be here presently.”

The shadow deepened on Ballion’s face. Somewhere a clock struck five.

Chapter Three

TESTIMONY

Francis Ballion: what kind of man he was, where he had been during that last night of October—this had become the supreme issue. To Norse and myself, except for his portrait downstairs, he was still merely a name. There was nothing, it seemed to me, we could do but wait for his arrival.

On this score, however, Norse held a different opinion.

"I don't know when he'll be here," observed the detective, "but I hope later than sooner, because that will give us time."

"For what?" I asked.

"For two things: first, to look at his collection; and secondly, to talk about him with Carl, if he's willing, and Miss Graham, if she's able, and Señor Hasta."

I felt cynical.

"It's an early hour to admire antiques."

"I'm sorry," returned Norse sweetly, "that I can't advance the sun for you. But am I wrong, Doctor, in assuming that you, for instance, when examining a patient, do not content yourself with thermometer and stethoscope, but are curious as to what he thinks, what his habits are, and the like? The same applies to my own less eminent profession."

"Oh, I see," I answered, "you think then. . ."

He cut me short. "I'm *not* thinking; I'm absorbing. And I beg of you and everybody else to do the same. Thinking will come in time. Absorb!" He added incisively: "Above all, *feel!* And now let's go down, get Hasta to bring us some coffee, and we'll look at Mr. Ballion's museum."

We drank our coffee in the dining-room, where only last evening Celia had welcomed me with her wistful, old-fashioned courtesy. Now, invaded by the gray morning light, it seemed, if possible, emptier and more forbidding. Her words relative to Greyhouse recurred echo-like: "built in evil days, when there was no God." Unconscious prophecy, keen-eyed delusion! I felt once more pass through me the whisper of her fear.

As it happened, Norse was elaborating a theory which oddly enough harmonized with my own reflections.

"What I mean," he was saying, "is the necessity of catching the undertones and overtones of a man's personality in order to understand him. Naturally at present on the bald surface of facts, your brother is implicated. A jury should be guided only by fact. I," he went on, sipping reflectively, "can and should allow myself the luxury of impressions, so as to reach new and more significant fact. Presently I shall be meeting Mr. Ballion under abnormal circumstances. In simple justice I must know what he's like normally, and avoid snatching at conclusions. You understand."

"I do," said Carl, "and I'm grateful. Francis is ten years older than I, and we've never been intimate—he had scholarly interests, and I've been mixed up in practical affairs—but I could vouch personally for his innocence."

"No doubt," interrupted Norse with a shrug of the shoulders, "naturally!"

"A man of fine taste," continued Carl, "wide reading, and quick sentiment."

"Obviously," agreed the other; "this house proves it. Have you observed, Ames, that everything in it from hall to attic is, in some aspect or other, Italian? Before even examining Mr. Ballion's library, I'm certain I shall find a number of Italian books there. But not only this is true; the style reflects a rather short period—to hazard a guess, I should say the latter half of the fifteenth century. Mere decorators don't succeed like that—it takes a scholar."

"Doubtless," murmured Carl, but he seemed absorbed in his own thought. Then with contrasting alertness of manner, he sprang up. "Well, gentlemen, shall we be looking at the collection?"

My earlier visits to the great room, more nearly associated than any other with the master of Greyhouse, had been in haste and for a definite purpose. I now had leisure to admire its size and the richness of its contents. Moreover, daylight gave an increased definiteness. I should say it was about fifty feet long and twenty wide. In height it was certainly not under thirty feet. Book-shelves lined most of the walls, and above these were hung at intervals silken pennons, gonfalons, battle standards, shredded and frayed by conflict or time. Along the center of the room was arranged what even a layman could recognize as a priceless collection of armor inlaid and skilfully decorated, together with weapons of various sorts—the double-handed sword, the mace, the spear, the rapier, the broad-sword, the stiletto.

These, coupled with the flags above, gave the impression of some old armory—an impression strengthened by the stone flooring of the room, although here and there rugs preserved it from bareness.

In aisles between book-shelves and weapons appeared other objects of different kinds, here a case of rich manuscripts, or another of coins, of seals, of ivories and curios of the sort. Rendered attentive by Norse's earlier remark, I noticed that all of these belonged practically to a single epoch—presumably mid-Renaissance—and I guessed that most of them had been derived from Italy. The result was a harmonious blending of otherwise incongruous things; they were given an evasive unity by the spirit of their age, so that silken banners, burnished steel, and parchment-covered books joined in a single effect. Therefore, while actually a museum of a certain period, it avoided the chaos of a museum and remained also a splendid apartment.

The end of the room was reserved for a separate collection, the nature of which appeared at first glance obscure. I supposed it to be a number of kitchen utensils rudely fashioned of wrought iron, and vaguely wondered that these should be brought into contrast with the exceedingly rare and beautiful objects near by. There were several metal pitchers, a brazier with iron rods of various lengths, a chopping knife, a large wooden block with a handle, such as is used in pounding meat, three or four small hammers, a cartwheel, some contrivances of wood and leather, and the like. Near-by stood a strangely shaped bench covered with a rug, and against it, as if mislaid from the center of the room, leaned a two-handed sword. I could make nothing of all this, and would have passed on, had I not seen Norse's usually serene face harden to a look of intentness not unlike that of a dog at the first scent of his quarry.

"Perhaps you," he said to Ballion, "can explain the use of several among these tools that I'm not familiar with—for example, the brass basin there?"

Carl smiled, and I was drawn to imitate him upon what seemed to me so idle a question. But the smile froze to my lips.

"Why," he answered, "after being heated to the proper shade, it was passed in front of the eyes of the victim—with the natural result."

His matter-of-fact words shook me like a blow. Also the truth began to dawn, that these things—

"And that square bar yonder?" asked Norse.

Again Ballion smiled. “Was for breaking the limbs of anyone strapped to the wheel. Francis assures me that death at times did not ensue for several days.”

And I understood that these things were the equipment of a torture room.

I believe that a goodly part of what ingenuity has devised for the infliction of pain on wretched human carcasses was represented there. Ballion continued his hideous catalogue: an iron flaying whip, exceedingly rare; a band for compressing the forehead, a beam for dislocation by the cord, iron spits of unmentionable purpose, the Spanish boot, knives of a curious pattern. . .

I felt my gorge rise. Norse himself turned away.

“That’s enough. I can imagine the value of such an assortment.”

“My brother,” said Carl, “has a partial history at least of everything in his collection. It interests him to know where and how they have been used.”

In Norse’s phrase, I was “absorbing” at the moment more than I could stand. And imagination, pitiless enough, evoked a scene where by the side of her husband a shrinking woman listened as he “explained” these things —“the aids to eloquence”—his irony, bitter as steel. From that moment, I had no further doubt as to the guilt of Francis Ballion. And I think that even Norse’s equanimity was shaken.

“Of course,” I heard him mutter, “it’s possibly a clear case after all.” And to Carl Ballion, “Perhaps in view of these other oddities you can explain to us that door at the corner of the room.”

“I suppose you mean what Francis calls the *porta del mortuccio*.”

“The Door of the Dead Man or of Death,” translated Norse, “but what does that mean?”

“You will have observed,” returned Carl, “how thorough an antiquary my brother is. There appears to have been a superstition in certain Italian families that by the same way Death once has passed he is apt to reënter, and hence they reserved a door for burial purposes no wider than would permit the passage of a coffin. It was always locked. When Death returned, he found the access narrow and barred. Perhaps he would then go on to some less difficult house. Except on funeral occasions, it was fatal to open that door.”

“Ah,” murmured Norse, “and the woman’s face carved inside?”

"A Medusa's head, as additional safeguard. Francis tells me that this entire tradition was confined to the city or *contado* of Perugia. I'm merely repeating him." There was a note of lightness in Carl's voice which indicated that he agreed with us in considering the whole thing grotesque. "A scholar's hobby," he added.

"Well," remarked Norse, "there remain the books." And for a while he walked up and down in front of the shelves, like a person in a flower-garden, examining titles and now and then plucking out a volume to look at it more closely. Occasionally I heard him grunt as if interested in something; but I confess it seemed to me a waste of time, and I stood idly, turning over no very pleasant thoughts as we waited. Carl Ballion also was silent, and appeared, as he had good cause to be, depressed. Recalling the portrait, I could not but admit that the Ballions were an unusually handsome pair. Ten years ago Carl's name, as the foremost athlete of his university, had been on everybody's lips. He was not, however, of the burly, square-faced type, but inclined rather to height, speed, and agility. Moreover, his record since then had been one of continued success, as journalist, editor, active in politics, in society, wherever men assembled, an honorable name for clear thought as well as energy. I could easily imagine what was in his mind as he paced back and forth across the width of the room. And in connection with him I thought of Eleanor. Well for me that I cherished no illusions about myself in comparison with Ballion. He had known her for years and possessed in manner and presence everything that women admire. I was a lanky, graceless person, wrapped up in my practice, a misfit with women who eyed me critically. I worked hard at my trade, and that was all. It had been a mistake to flatter myself with even the shadow of a hope. And thereupon I resolved not to think of Eleanor again, that is, no more than I could help, or as one beyond my reach. As a resolve, it was well intentioned.

"And now," said Norse, rejoining us, "I'd like some further information; but I'll be fair with you, Carl—you don't have to testify against your brother."

"And I should not," returned the other. "I'm willing, though, to tell anything you could find out elsewhere. Besides, all I know is perfectly innocent."

Considering it the part of discretion to withdraw, I was detained by Norse.

"If you don't mind," he said, "I'll ask you to stand by during these interviews. Carl," he added bluntly, "would probably be of more use to me on account of his training. But he's naturally partizan. You're an outsider and neutral." He seated himself at a great desk loaded with books and motioned us to draw up chairs. "Now," he continued, "what I want to know first, if possible, is the state of Mr. Ballion's fortune. I remember that his wife inherited large means. Did he have property of his own independent of hers?"

"Certainly," replied Ballion. "About ten years ago, he made several millions in oil lands."

"Do you know anything in regard to your sister-in-law's holdings? When her father, Gordon Graham, died, I recall that he left his two children a fortune rated at about five millions. Is that true?"

Carl shrugged.

"I know nothing definite about it."

"What I am getting at," said Norse, "is this: Could your brother have reached a point where Celia Ballion's death would have benefited him financially? I have to be inconsiderate, you see." He threw out a hand in a gesture of apology, and I noticed how deceptively delicate it looked, the nervous hand of a writer or musician. "His collections here," continued Norse, "doubtless involved a great expenditure—not to speak of the house. And there is one collection which every one has heard of and of which I find no trace—namely, his collection of precious stones. Now it's conceivable that even his resources have been drained."

"It's conceivable," admitted Carl.

"Was Celia Ballion's property in her own name?"

"It was, but I believe Francis managed it as her agent."

"At her death, I suppose a part would revert to him and a part to Eleanor Graham?"

"I believe it would."

Norse leaned forward.

"In addition, do you know of anything further—personal property, jewels, life insurance—by which her husband would be the beneficiary at her death?"

Carl Ballion hesitated and looked away.

"I don't know," he said, "that I. . ." And then, as if aware that silence on this point would be useless, "There was," he admitted slowly, "life insurance for a large amount taken out by Celia not long ago. It was in favor of Francis. I know this because he consulted me on the company, and mentioned the fact. He believes in insurance and carries a considerable policy himself."

"Ah," breathed Norse, it seemed to me, with an accent of regret. I was becoming fairly impatient with his reluctance in accepting what I thought grew momently more obvious.

"And this amount?" he asked.

"Was for two hundred thousand, I believe."

Norse sighed again.

"That's all for the present, then—except this: You did not know where your brother was at three o'clock this morning; but had you seen him perhaps last evening?"

"I had not. I was at the Press Club banquet, which was over very late. Then I came home."

A knock at the door interrupted us, and a man whom I had not seen before, but evidently one of Norse's subordinates, entered.

"Mr. Ballion and I have just arrived, Captain" (it was always hard for me to remember that Norse was a captain), "and he insists on speaking with you at once."

Something of the game-cock showed itself in the detective's manner.

"He insists, does he? Please ask him to be patient. And, by the way, Redsby, if he should make any move to leave the house, you would detain him. Tell Hasta, the butler, that I want him here." And to Carl: "You'd better see Mr. Ballion; be perfectly frank with him if you wish."

When the door opened, I heard a voice angry and powerful beyond; it was cut off entirely by the closing latch.

"Humph!" remarked Norse. "And now for Hasta."

It would be prolix to record in detail our interview with the butler. He had regained his suave inscrutability of last evening, which remained proof against what seemed to me Norse's bullying tactics. He testified that his name was Jacob Hasta, that he had been by trade a printer and only a printer until about a year ago, when, unable longer to stand the confining work of

the presses, he had, on Carl Ballion's recommendation, been given his present position, to which he had adapted himself readily enough, and with which he had thus far every reason to be satisfied. He was a native of Cuba and had worked at his trade in various cities of Spanish America. In the United States he had been employed only at the press of Carl Ballion's newspaper and another which he mentioned.

"You speak English well enough," observed Norse.

"My mother was American."

He declared that Francis Ballion had been an indulgent employer, but admitted that he was subject to moods of depression, or again of anger, and volunteered that he was very angry now. It took a good deal of ruffling and threatening on Norse's part to get him to concede that Mr. Ballion had recently seemed disturbed about something.

Was this only an impression, Norse inquired, or had he definite grounds for thinking so?

"Well, sir, it was yesterday morning, before Mr. Ballion left, that I caught some words between him and Mrs. Ballion."

"Where were *you*?" asked Norse, sarcastically.

"I was in Miss Eleanor's room, mending one of her window ropes. She was there too and can bear me out. *They* were in the hall."

"What then?"

"I heard Mr. Ballion say—but really, sir, it's only his way. He doesn't mean anything. And it's none of my business."

"But it's *my* business," rapped out Norse; his eyes narrowed over a harsh face. "I'm here to listen, and believe me it will be healthier for you to speak."

"Well, sir, if you will have it, I heard Mr. Ballion say this: 'For all the life in you, for all the good you are to yourself and any one, you might be in your grave.' And she said, 'I am in my grave.' "

"Did you hear anything else?"

"I think they were having a dispute."

"About what?"

"I believe, sir, about money. There was something to do with a check she didn't want to sign. Miss Eleanor closed the door."

Norse sat for a moment tapping his pencil against his teeth. Then taking an ink-pad from his pocket, he demanded Hasta's fingerprints, which the latter stamped on a piece of paper without hesitation.

"That'll be enough," said Norse. "If Miss Graham is able, tell her that she'll greatly oblige me by coming down. If not, I'll see Mr. Ballion."

Once more we heard the sound of voices in the hall which were cut in two by the closing door.

Tossing his pencil on the desk, Norse stirred uneasily.

"The devil!" he said. "I feel as if a noose were tightening on my own neck. And yet that fellow Hasta's a scoundrel—I'll vouch for it. Somehow or other, his face haunts me, but I can't recall where. . ." His voice trailed off.

Not knowing Eleanor Graham as well then as I do now, it surprised me when a few minutes later she came in, looking very white but equally poised and determined. That it surprised Norse as well was evident from his manner of receiving her. Having acted the bully a moment past, he was now a courtier abounding in solicitude and delicacy.

"You're a very rare person," he murmured. "I had scarcely hoped. . . But I shall not detain you long—there are merely one or two matters . . ."

"There is one matter," she interrupted levelly, "that I believe no one knows as yet about this affair. I concealed it deliberately. It seemed to me that I had no right to cast suspicion on an innocent man—that is, as long as I believed him innocent. It's a struggle even now." She made an effort to steady her voice, looking with strangely troubled eyes at her examiner. "As it is, I am giving you simply what impressed me at the time. It's probably imagination, only I feel that nothing should be kept back which would help to punish whoever committed that dreadful thing last night."

"What have you to tell us?" said Norse. "Believe me, no one is more eager for justice than I am; and no one would be less inclined to accept a notion for fact. At this stage, we are trying merely to understand, and reticence of any sort is stupid, if not criminal."

"It was this," replied Eleanor. "When I called Doctor Ames to my sister's room, I told him that I fancied I had heard footsteps. As a matter of fact, I had not only heard, but I had seen."

She paused for a second, as if in search of words. There was absolute silence. I saw Norse's lips drawn to a line.

"Standing at my bedroom window, I saw on the driveway a man's shadow cast by the driveway light beyond the corner of the house. I could not see him. The shadow was magnified; it stood motionless a second, and then disappeared. Not long afterward I heard in the distance the starting of a motor."

"But may I ask," said Norse, "why you should have been unwilling to communicate this fact until now?"

"It was because I thought—because I imagined I recognized that shadow, but could not be sure."

"And you imagined it as whose?"

Our intentness at the moment was well-nigh painful. It seemed to us that everything turned on her answer.

"As the shadow," she whispered, "of Francis Ballion."

I heard Norse's sharp breath as if in token of finality.

"He wears," she went on, "a black felt hat of peculiar shape, not unlike those you see in the Paris Latin Quarter. And it was distinctly the form of this which appeared in the shadow."

"Did you," I asked, struck by a certain idea, "see this before or after you heard the footsteps?"

"Afterward," said Eleanor. "I imagine he was then leaving the house."

Thus obviously had come the end of whatever mystery was connected with the case. For me it had long ceased to offer any mystery at all, and I considered a good many of Norse's questions and hesitancies utterly pedantic. I set it down as an effect of his training that he preferred a corkscrew to a straight line and contrived a problem to display his skill in solving it. These gestures over, he could now arrest Francis Ballion for as sordid and brutal a crime as any one ever perpetrated. But for all that, he remained apparently unsatisfied.

"Hasta spoke of a dispute yesterday, an altercation," he began.

"That's true," said Eleanor; "we could not avoid hearing it."

"Was there, to your knowledge, any friction between your sister and Mr. Ballion with regard to money?"

“There was,” she answered. “He had spent on Greyhouse and his collections here much more than he could afford. Celia had been generous; but recently, believing that there was no limit to his extravagance, she attempted to refuse appeals for additional sums. I say ‘attempted’ because it’s not easy to refuse *him*. This led to very painful scenes.”

“I can well understand,” murmured Norse. “I shan’t need to detain you any longer, Miss Graham. Your testimony has helped greatly.” He accompanied her to the door, her dark, slender figure taller than his own.

At the threshold she turned, looking back at me. “I’m very sorry to have brought you into this, Richard, but I’m more grateful still for all your kindness.”

I could only falter a word or so; but in spite of Carl Ballion and my own resolve, I knew then that I loved her, loved the beauty and courage of her, and the strange, vivid eyes. I knew this and realized also its futility. But after all, one is rather helpless in these matters. And if I chose in secrecy to light an altar, I alone would be harmed by the flames.

These reflections were cut through by the shriek of a police whistle, and I looked up in amazement to see Norse blowing with might and main. It struck me that he had taken leave of his senses, and this impression was strengthened when upon removing the whistle, and having waited a moment in silence, he smiled.

“Your form of amusement,” I observed, “seems to me rather untimely.”

“Perhaps it is,” he admitted, “but I wanted to satisfy myself on a certain point. You noticed that when the doors close, any voice outside is cut off as if in a telephone. Redsby is in the hall not thirty feet away. The room’s absolutely soundproof.” Then, dropping the subject, “Well, what do you think about all this?”

“Why, there’s only one way to think,” I answered impatiently. “You know that, don’t you?”

“Oh, certainly,” he exclaimed, “certainly! But I wish I had your confidence. Somehow, with every new proof I feel less convinced, and if your mind were not already shut like a trap, I’d attempt to show you why. But I’ll admit it’s an instinct, a sort of mental undercurrent. And I’ll admit besides that if ever the breadth of a hair stood between any one and the gallows, it’s now in the case of Francis Ballion.

“Well, we’ll have to see him; and if I know anything of men I imagine the interview will be something of a strain.”

Chapter Four

FRANCIS BALLION

He stood on the threshold regarding us, and I felt immediately, as if it were a weight, the dominance of personality. There was something of the feline, but of the lion breed, in the arrogant poise of head, the implied sense of power and menacing alertness. That he was angry was evident, for he wore the white band of passion on his forehead, and his eyes smoldered as they looked at us; but for the rest his movements were deliberate. It was the calm of a smoothly burning fuse. Without a shift of glance, he drew a case from his pocket, lit a cigarette, and exhaled slowly; but every gesture breathed contempt. And when he spoke at last, the depth and courtesy of his voice were added venom.

"Gentlemen! You have the advantage of me as to name—perhaps one or the other of you can inform me if I am host or guest?"

Outraged as I was at the man, and bold as I had been in thought, I found myself speechless. It was Norse who answered in a tone of mock humility.

"Sir, with pleasure—only I'm inclined to believe you are neither host *nor* guest."

A sneer parted the other's lips.

"What am I then?"

"A prisoner, I think. And I am Norse of the Metropolitan Police. This is Doctor Richard Ames."

Undaunted, Ballion smiled, and his smile was like the flick of a lash.

"Moreover," continued Norse with a change of manner, "your attitude is slightly unbecoming. You're in no position to take the high hand with us, and it would be wiser if you refrained."

But the fuse had burned short.

"One moment," said Ballion, his eyes narrowing. "Let us understand each other, please. Your prisoner, so be it—I bow to fortune. But do not undertake to lecture me on manners, you; or think to make me cringe; or hope to frighten me." He gave a short laugh. "Why, man, do you abuse yourself with the idea that any threat of yours will impress me? Therefore, I shall take a high hand, if I wish, and I shall regard you as a hired busybody

and this fellow here as your jackal, if it suits me. And I shall treat you as I please. Is that clear?"

There is a certain height of pride which is almost beautiful, and even while raging at the words, I could not withhold a grudging admiration. Here he was beneath the very shadow of the noose, already well-nigh doomed, and at Norse's mercy; but no sovereign prince had ever rated his slaves more fiercely. There was something satanic in his insolence and in his bearing as he stood, head up, defying us; and a splendor about him that preserved his manner from brutality.

But if arrogance may be admirable, self-control is surely so, and I have at no time felt a higher regard for Norse than then. It was plain that he equaled the other in fearlessness, but also kept his head and remembered his purpose. He slowly advanced toward Ballion, and they looked at each other eye to eye, an equation of two personalities.

"You amaze me," he said coldly. "This is no competition in courage; I insinuate nothing as to yours. Commit suicide with a swagger if you wish—the insults of a man placed like you do not greatly disturb me. But, as you mentioned, I'm a hireling with a duty to perform, and I intend to perform it, regardless of your manners or lack of them. Your sole choice in the matter is to render it more or less disagreeable to yourself."

It cannot be claimed that Ballion was in the least subdued. His haughtiness was too inherent for that. On the contrary, without yielding an inch he seemed rather to forget both Norse and myself, and turning away walked back and forth as if lost in thought.

"Disagreeable to me!" he jeered at length. "My wife dead, my house invaded, my privacy the gossip of servants and intruders—and all the while myself on fire, choked with fire—the thirst of it to feel my hands about the throat of whoever did that thing last night! Have you seen her face upstairs? I pulled off the shroud and looked. I hated Celia at times. I looked. I remembered the years ago—I remembered youth! And how we loved! What a thing life is—change, change, change. Love dies. She was a thing of exquisite and perfect beauty. And for me beauty died. But the shadow of an old day came back upon me; I stooped and kissed her lips. Oh, God, God, I could have spared her if I had realized—if I had understood that I could be no other but myself."

It is impossible to transcribe the intensity of passion in his voice. It was elemental. He had forgotten, I believe, not only our presence, but the very place he was in.

He drew himself up sharply, and staring at Norse: “I hardly mean to unburden myself to you. Come, what is it? You give me audience in my own room—what have you to say? From some talk of Carl’s I understand you suspect me of killing Celia and have set your men to follow me about. Blundering, I imagine, is your trade.”

Norse interrupted him.

“Did Carl Ballion tell you *why* we suspect?”

“I refused to listen. . .”

Again Norse interrupted: “Then I advise you to listen now.” He spoke in an even, metallic voice that seemed to command the other’s attention in spite of himself. And as he proceeded I noticed a gradual change on Ballion’s face.

“Here are the facts: Yesterday, following a dispute with your wife regarding money which she either refused or was unwilling to advance—a dispute which appears to have been only the last of many—you left Greyhouse. Last night between the hours of one and three she was murdered by strangling. Your glove was found on the bed. A man’s shadow with a hat similar to yours was seen on the house driveway. You have keys permitting your entrance. When called at four o’clock you had not returned to your club. In addition, it appears that you would benefit financially at her death, and that your relations have been strained for some time. She seems to have been in fear of you, and on the other hand you have neglected her. Surely to a person of your discernment, I hardly need point out that, barring contrary testimony, any jury would convict you on this evidence. You are in an exceedingly dangerous position, and it is a matter for your decision as to what course your defense will take. I must warn you besides that anything you say may be used against you.”

But the change I had observed on the other’s features was one of utter bewilderment.

“My glove,” he muttered, “a hat similar to mine! What devil’s business is it? Show me the glove.”

Norse drew a carefully wrapped package from his coat pocket and opened it.

“Yes,” said Ballion, “it’s mine.” And bewilderment gave place to a look of curious, almost impersonal, interest. It was as if he had grown absorbed by a problem.

"But there were others in the house," he mused, "who might have committed the crime. For instance, Hasta."

"Nothing was taken," answered Norse; "it would have been motiveless."

"Or Eleanor. She is physically strong enough. *She* would profit at Celia's death."

The blood sprang to my head at this: "You scoundrel," I said.

He turned to me with a most gracious smile.

"Oh, I'm far from accusing. I suggest merely. And your warmth, my friend, recalls the fact that you were Eleanor's guest, perhaps admirer. Isn't it just conceivable that you might benefit by my wife's death, when it comes to that? Please," he said, waving me back, "please! A man with a halter about his neck may be allowed certain liberties." And to Norse: "I am merely thinking aloud. But tell me, granting that I am the assassin, how comes it I could enter the house without disturbing either door chain or bolt or window-fastening?"

"You have a latch-key to the front door," replied Norse; "there is nothing to have prevented you from letting yourself in before the chains were put up and remaining concealed until the family had retired."

"True; but how to leave again without lowering the chains, or releasing a bolt? They are not accessible from the outside." And Ballion drew out another cigarette. But it remained unlighted, for suddenly Norse pointed to the narrow door in the angle of the room.

"That way," he said. "On the blank, outer side, it is studded with iron sufficient to allow purchase for the fingers in closing it. Your problem could be solved that way."

Ballion stared at the door with a strange, I almost thought frightened, expression.

"It has never been opened," he answered gravely. "It is reserved for occasions of burial. It is the Door of the Dead. If my wishes are regarded, Celia's body will pass that way. You need not believe me, but I would be the last on earth to use it. We all have our superstitions."

"Well, superstition or not," returned Norse, "it was opened last night."

I was unprepared for what followed. As if he had been struck, Ballion sprang to his feet and stood quivering. He made a swift sign of the Cross.

"You lie," he said, "or rather, forgive me, how can you know?"

His pride of manner had changed to intent earnestness.

"Come here," replied Norse, already moving toward the door in question. "You say it was never opened?"

"I do—emphatically."

"In that case there would be a collection of dust gradually formed between jamb and door."

"Perhaps."

"But if it were opened this dust would be knocked down in front of the threshold. Moreover, it would be in thin cakes of a certain consistency; and if an opening had occurred, let us say last night, the dust would not yet have been swept up by whoever tends the room. Well, then, look carefully there along the floor."

Ballion stooped and gazed a long time. He breathed more quickly; his face had grown pale.

"I see," he murmured.

"Let me call your attention to something else," continued the other. "There was a high wind last night—you will observe that these wafers of dust lie within two yards' radius of the threshold."

Ballion nodded; then suddenly, "Perhaps *you* opened the door—what of that?"

"I had no key," returned Norse. "And by the way, where is the key?"

"There." Ballion pointed to some shelves of books against the wall, just inside to the right, as we faced it, of the narrow entrance, and indeed upon looking closely we saw on one of the middle rows a long key elaborately designed, which had thus far escaped our notice.

"So that," observed Norse, "any one, having opened, could easily replace the key in its usual place before closing from outside." But at this point he fell into a sudden brown study, his eyes now on the key, now on the door, and I could see his hands move slightly, like one unconsciously reproducing an imagined movement.

"The house faces east," he observed at length; "it was an east wind, I believe." Then he turned to Francis Ballion.

But the latter had moved away and was seated in an arm-chair near the desk. Or rather he was huddled in it. I have seldom seen a more vacant face,

or one so drained of hope—frozen to a grim apathy. If he had now become convinced that his guilt was evident, it was none the less strange that his courage had so completely vanished. But I did him an injustice, for when Norse, returning to the original topic, observed, “It appears then that if you were the assassin, you might have gone out this way,” he agreed indifferently, and pulling himself together, added, “What does that matter?”

“I should think,” said Norse, “it was very important.”

“What matters,” continued Ballion, “is that the door was opened, that Death entered”—his dark eyes swept the room—“fatal to me, but fatal also to others, perhaps many.” And dropping into a half whisper: “I feel his spirit as if it were standing here—waiting. What does the rest concern us—I told you it was not I who crossed that threshold.”

So, the cold, inaudible voice of superstition had daunted this strange man, whom no threat of physical danger impressed. And it was noteworthy that he was a man of education and keen mind; but no one is free from self-imposed specters. And indeed at the moment I confess that something in his voice or manner stirred in me a vague discomfort, an echo, absurd enough, of his own foreboding.

“Come,” said Norse, “you are not the man to indulge in puerilities.”

The taunt had its effect, but I was surprised that Ballion showed no resentment. He drew himself up and returned the other’s glance.

“You are right, for even in the face of death there remains our debt to Honor. But your philosophy is narrow. Traditions are not all fiction; beliefs hold usually a central truth. I do not attempt to defend mine; they are simply an element in me, puerile if you like—I hope merely that.” He stood up, and for the first time I saw play about his lips the courteous, winning smile shown in his portrait. “Listen,” he said, “I’m beginning to have an esteem for you, little Mr. Norse, with your straightforward ways. Hang me, if you please, but I shall not disturb your sense of the logical with any more of my fancies. And as far as courage goes, I think I shall not disgrace my name.”

“May I ask,” returned Norse unexpectedly, “what that name is?” And when Ballion stared, “or rather what it was? It’s a mere notion of mine, but I saw among your books some volumes concerned with the history of a family, at one time famous, of course, the Baglioni family of Perugia.[1] I was struck by your interest and the resemblance in name.”

Ballion smiled. “A philological detective! You were not wrong. An ancestor of mine came to America in 1790. His name was Francesco

Baglioni—afterward anglicized. I am a descendant of that family."

"And therefore," said Norse, "your interest in things Italian?"

"An instinctive interest," answered Ballion, "that came of itself. I cannot remember the time when I was without it."

"Which includes," continued Norse, "an interest in Renaissance criminal procedure, as I observed."

"You mean my collections." His face lightened. "Would it interest you if I showed some of the more unusual specimens—they are of great historic value."

"Another time," returned the detective; "it seems to me we have more immediate business on hand. I have been frank with you, Mr. Ballion. I have spread out the cards that would be used by a prosecuting attorney. And they are trumps. As matters stand at present, you have no defense. But obviously there remains in your hands a piece of evidence which would invalidate everything against you and throw another light on the affair—in other words, the simple statement susceptible of proof as to where you were last night between the hours of one and four."

Evidently Norse was surprised, and certainly I was, when Ballion made no answer. It was the crux of the matter. Assuming him to be guilty, he had yet taken infinite pains to leave no trace of his presence last night in Greyhouse. He had gone to the city, stopped at a fashionable club, carefully remembered the system of doors and locks at home, used an instrument of murder so skilfully as almost to cast doubt on the fact itself, and had returned this morning full of indignation and innocence. It was unthinkable then that he had failed to establish a plausible alibi. But for all that, he remained silent, staring in front of him. And at last:

"I have no statement to make."

In his irritation, Norse struck the desk with his open hand. "Do you mean to say that you refuse to tell where you were at those hours?"

"I do."

"But for what reason, man—even if it were a lie!"

"I'm unused to lying," observed Ballion coldly. "My reasons are personal—and sufficient."

"You are intent then on ruining yourself? If you are innocent, as you claim, you prefer the disgrace of an unnatural crime, and very probably a

shameful death, to the least exertion that would clear you? Damn me," said Norse, "I fail to understand. Are you sick of life?"

For my part, after all, I did not share the detective's bewilderment. This man, for all his manner and affectations, was guilty, and furnished no alibi for the very *sufficient* reason that he had none which would stand probing. His better cue was mysterious dignity.

"Does this house," said Ballion with a sweep of the hand, "this room, look as if I were tired of life? Have I brought together at the cost of millions, things of beauty and rare value, simply to turn my back on them? At the age of forty I am more alive than the majority one sees at thirty. I love my studies, I love the exertion of thought, I love beauty in art or man or nature. I worship life as the only thing I know and have to worship. Well then, if I refuse to answer your question, the reason is imperative. I believe there's nothing more to say."

"Indeed, but there is," snapped Norse. "If you won't save yourself, you should help me to save you." He paused a moment. "You drove your car into town?"

"I did, and drove it back. It's outside now."

"At what city garage did you leave it?"

"The Cosmos."

"Ames, will you please ask Lieutenant Redsby to call up the Cosmos Garage and inquire if Mr. Ballion's car was there during the night?"

"Useless," interrupted Bullion, "it was not there."

"But where then. . ."

The other shook his head.

"No, Mr. Norse, if you wish to save me, as you say, you must do it alone." He raised his hand, as if the subject were closed. "And now in turn may I ask you whether you intend to put me under arrest at once, or will grant me a breathing space?"

"How much?"

"Twenty-four hours. I have some things here I should like to arrange. There is also the question of Celia's burial. If you could do this for me," he smiled again his slow, courteous smile, "I should be very grateful."

“I will,” said Norse, “but you are not to leave the house. You will be under detention and there will be men posted to enforce it.”

“Naturally,” agreed the other, “but I can’t express my thanks. Let me, however, do what I have very seldom done, that is, apologize—for my manners on entering. Of the two of us, you were the gentleman.”

I was left out of this amnesty on Ballion’s part, though not, I believe, with any intention. But I did not greatly care. Norse’s laxity seemed to me incomprehensible. I was no officer of justice, and it was not for me to protest; but at every turn of this examination, at every new step, each fact or implication had united to establish the guilt of Francis Ballion. And now on the score of lofty manner and a winning smile he was to be left at comparative liberty for a day and a night, when everything called for immediate action. I sat listening impatiently to their talk about Ballion’s historical interests, a book he was preparing on Etruscan antiquities, and how he could only work in a soundproof study, when a knock at the door interrupted us, and Norse’s man, Roose, entered to make his report.

“I’ve found,” he said, “some footprints on the gravel just outside there,” and he jerked his thumb toward the narrow door. “They were pretty plain, and here are the tracings. Position and direction noted. The gravel is of a peculiar red color, and that might be worth remembering.”

Norse glanced at the tracings.

“Very well—anything else?”

“This,” said Roose impressively, and removing it from his pocket he laid on the desk something black that stirred and uncoiled as if alive. I heard a sharp exclamation from Ballion.

Looking at this object I saw that it was a leather strap, looped and provided with a steel hook that served also as handle.

Snatching it up, Norse gazed, and then thrust the thing out toward Ballion.

“Here,” he said, “this would seem to be a specimen from your collection.” But the other looked away, his face ashen, and staring. “Well, is it yours?” continued Norse.

Ballion nodded.

“Tell us what it is then—you’re an expert in such things.” He held up the strap between thumb and forefinger, like a dead adder.

“Why,” said Ballion at last in a thick voice, “don’t you see what it is! It’s the *garrote* of the Inquisition, the strangling thong!”

There was a moment’s silence.

“I suppose now,” he continued, “you will be inclined to revoke your decision as to my arrest?”

But I was amazed at the firmness of Norse’s reply. “No, I am *not*.”

“That’s strange,” murmured the other, and my thought echoed him. “Can it be that you believe me innocent?”

“I do.” And as I stared at him, incredulous, Norse added: “It’s a question, though, if any one else would believe it. You shall have your twenty-four hours. Afterward, I shall be forced to act on the evidence.”

---

[1] The name is pronounced Ballionï.

Chapter Five

CERTAINTY

To Eleanor and Carl Ballion, whom we rejoined outside, Norse volunteered but scant information. He stated merely that his investigations at Greyhouse were over for the present, that no arrest had been made, that he would return to-morrow for the coroner's inquest, and that meanwhile the house would be under surveillance. And he spoke in a manner that precluded questions.

"I assume," he went on, "that you, Miss Graham, will wish to leave the house. In that case please send your new address to my office."

But in this he was mistaken, for she expressed her intention of remaining near the body of her sister until after the burial.

"I could not think of her alone here," she said. "Celia would have wanted me near her. And it's the last and only thing I can do."

The idea of her spending another night at Greyhouse in the vicinity of a man like Francis Ballion seemed to me outrageous, and even Carl looked grave, but Norse apparently was unconcerned.

"You'll be perfectly safe," he declared. "I'm leaving Redsby in the house, and there'll be several men stationed outside. You need feel no anxiety. And now I'll be getting back to town."

"My car's in the garage," I said. "I'll drive you back."

"And I," remarked Carl Ballion, "will call at your office a little later, if you don't mind."

"As you please."

Having bid good-by to Eleanor—I confess with more feeling on my part than I had any reason to indulge—we were on the point of leaving when the library doors opened and Francis Ballion appeared.

He had regained something of his former manner, that is, with regard to pride of bearing; but softened now by a cordiality which I have never seen surpassed.

"I could not let you go," he said to Norse, "without once more extending my thanks. As a doomed man, I have found at least a gentle executioner. I

trust we shall meet again to-morrow, and I trust you may have good fortune with your problem."

Norse had a suite in one of the municipal buildings which consisted of a bedroom, consulting room, library, and laboratory. Hitherto we had met at the club or elsewhere, and it was the first time I had visited him here. It was Sunday, and an officially leisure day for him, so that as we waited he showed me about the place.

I have always held that the analysis of a person's character is to be found in the books he surrounds himself with. His education, personal interests, range, and habits appear more closely reflected here than anywhere else; and in this case, I was peculiarly struck by the variety of Norse's reading, for the volumes on his shelves looked worn and intimate, and were not there for show. Outside of law books and works on criminology, which might have been expected to form the professional part of his collection, he seemed at one time or another to have gained some familiarity with most fields of knowledge. There were works on medicine, chemistry, and mathematics; on history and art; but I was above all impressed by the number of volumes dealing with philosophy, folklore, and psychology. All these were in addition to reference encyclopedias and the usual classics. I noticed, moreover, books in French, German, Italian, and Spanish.

"Where," I exclaimed, "do you find time—"

"I don't," he interrupted; "I take it. That's the only way to get anything done."

"But I don't understand, Norse, how this work, for instance, on taboo in the South Sea Islands, or Nietzsche's 'Also Sprach Zarathustra' has any bearing on your profession."

"That," he answered, "depends on what you think my profession is." He lit his pipe, a rare indulgence with him, for he was a light smoker, and tossing aside the match, added: "If it were simply a matter of catching crooks, I'd have resigned long ago. The catchpoll business depends on luck, and I've been reasonably lucky—but either you do or you don't. What interests me really, what is of direct social importance, are the causes underlying crime, and crime is merely an abnormal manifestation of life with all its foibles, aspirations, and necessities. This leads one anywhere—to Nietzsche's Superman or the primitive conceptions of religion. But it isn't as theoretical as it sounds. For example, there was Ballion's fear regarding a door he had built for himself in his own library: that door was taboo to him. As far as my studies go, you might call them practical criminology; for I've

read nothing that hasn't at one time or another helped me in a police investigation; and every investigation in turn throws light on some department of social science. The value of reading is that it adds new facets to the mind for the reflection of truth—even improbable truth. And that recalls this present case."

"Of Ballion?"

"Yes. Because I have a decided feeling that here, if ever, we must beware of the obvious. It all looks crystal-clear; and yet from another angle I'm under the impression that it's wrapped up in only seemingly transparent cobweb."

"I wish you'd tell me how."

"I will when Carl Ballion comes." And he changed the subject until a half-hour later, when Carl arrived.

"I can't tell you," said the latter directly, "how grateful both Francis and I are. I'd begun to fear that accidental circumstances made it look black for him."

We were seated in Norse's comfortable reading-room. He relit his pipe before answering.

"And so they do," he confessed; "but there are only two that I take seriously: his relations with his wife and his collection of headsman's tools. The first implies a motive, the second morbidity."

"But the glove?" I exclaimed.

"I told you," said Norse, "that that was a precious find. And its value consists in the fact that it was not worn last night."

Carl Ballion leaned forward excitedly.

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that. It was of stout, thick leather and fairly new. Not being pliable, if it had been worn recently, there would have been some rounding of the fingers; but the leather was almost flat. Moreover, it was of a size and consistency not to slip easily from a pocket. I spoke of the thing as a calling-card, and it is one—Francis Ballion's, which was left, I believe, by some one else."

"Good!" exclaimed Carl, beneath his breath, "good work!"

Norse shook his head.

"No, it's not conclusive. I can't *prove*, after all, that your brother didn't have it with him. But there's another thing of like character: the strangling thong, equally his, and equally found in a conspicuous place. Now two accidents of the same kind, two damaging clues lost near at hand by a person who otherwise showed great ability, begin to look peculiar. They begin to look as if they were not accidental. And the shadow of his hat seen by Miss Graham might be in the same category."

"You ascribe his absence from the club then—" I began; but he interrupted me.

"Yes, I'm coming to that. What earthly reason should Ballion have in going to town except to establish an alibi? If then he refuses to give one—though what his reasons are I don't know—it would seem a point in his favor. Besides, I don't believe that he's clever at pretense. He seems to me unusually impulsive, and I think his fear with regard to what is appropriately called the Door of Death was genuine."

"Why 'appropriately'?" asked Carl.

"Because if there's anything certain in this case, it is that the murderer passed out that way, if he did not enter it." And Norse explained to Carl the matter of the dust flakes.

"But he *could* not enter," I objected.

"He could if some one on the inside opened or had left it open; at any rate I'm inclined to believe that this some one *closed* the door after him."

"Why?" asked Carl.

"That's a point that I'll show you to-morrow at Greyhouse; but I think the evidence satisfactory. Of course, if demonstrable, the presence of a confederate within the house itself would be rather against than in favor of Mr. Ballion. There is, however, a counterbalancing indication, which I won't discuss at present, simply because I haven't had time to consider it thoroughly."

"Quite right," agreed Carl. "But may I ask whom you suspect in the house?"

"I'll answer that with another question: What do you know about Jacob Hasta?"

"Merely that he worked at our press for a year and seemed perfectly reliable. Nothing more."

Norse rapped the ashes from his pipe.

“I intend to investigate that gentleman—as well as every one else at Greyhouse.” He looked at me queerly. “Including Eleanor Graham,” he added. “We mustn’t forget that she also would have profited by Mrs. Ballion’s death.”

But when I frothed over, he reminded me, as Francis Ballion had done, that I also was in the house; and taking this as a sign that serious discussion was past, I got up and put on my hat.

“With all respect to Carl here,” I said, “your deductions about his brother seem less convincing than the apparent facts.”

“I admit it,” returned Norse soberly. “If he would only tell us where he was last night!”

Carl, who had sat for a moment lost in thought, answered suddenly:

“This evening I’ll go to Greyhouse and try to persuade him.”

But though I hoped Norse was right, I should have wagered he was wrong. As it turned out, the decision came sooner than either of us expected.

For the week-end at Greyhouse I had freed myself from hospital and other engagements, so that I was at liberty to spend the day as I chose; and I confess it was spent partly in sleep. Norse, as appeared later, was busy in finding out what he could with regard to Francis Ballion’s financial affairs, checking up the past of Jacob Hasta and of others in the staff at Greyhouse; while Carl was engaged by the never-ceasing routine of his newspaper. I believe he did what he could to prevent rumors about last night’s tragedy, and succeeded as far as the press was concerned. But when I dined at my club that evening, certain whispers were already abroad. I heard one of the older members, who had known Francis Ballion as a young man, discussing him with gusto; and all he said confirmed my prejudice.

“A gentleman,” declared the older member, “that is, in breeding. But a queer stick. Always had a devilish temper. Killed a man once with his bare hands—out West—about a woman. It was put down as self-defense and he got off. Lived free and wild and hard for all his education. I wouldn’t put this past him—if it’s true.”

“Why, Ames here,” said another, looking my way, but I had already moved off. My mind felt as a body does, when it has been over-tried, sore and inert. I managed to find a corner to myself, and sat smoking.

Just about this time last night, Celia, Eleanor, and I had drawn in semi-darkness before the fire in Greyhouse. Only twenty-four hours ago! It seemed incredible. I wondered how Eleanor was standing the loneliness out there and the siege of memories. If they were grim enough for me, what must they be for her! That night in sleep I heard again the howling of the wind, the hush of footsteps near me, saw a face pale and distorted bending down, and awoke in a cold sweat to the reality and solace of my own room. But in view of this, Eleanor's courage seemed all the more distinguished.

Norse, Ballion, and I had planned motoring out next morning together for the inquest, which had been set for eleven o'clock; but as the former wanted some previous talk with Francis Ballion, we arranged to arrive at Greyhouse an hour and a half earlier.

The detective's first words to Carl were a question: "Could you persuade him?"

The other shook his head: "No—he refused."

We drove for a while in silence. It was a bleak November day, with a hint of snow, and my hand felt stiff on the wheel. We were numb in spirits as well as physically, with small relish, at least on my part, for what we were about to face—all the less when Norse remarked at length:

"If he holds by his decision, I'm afraid I can't do any more." He alluded to the western affair, of which he also had heard, and added that Ballion's finances looked queer. "Perhaps I've been wrong," he admitted; "unless something occurs, I'll have to put him under arrest this morning."

So we entered the long drive which led up to Greyhouse. It appeared cold and palatial as ever with its high stone façade.

I was aware of several men patrolling outside. Before going in, Norse called to one, "Well, Roose, everything been all right?"

"Yes, sir. No one has left the house, and no one entered, except Mr. Carl Ballion last night. Redsby reports everything O. K. inside."

But as it happened, this must have been an earlier statement, for when the front door had been opened by Hasta, we found Redsby standing in the hall, an anxious look on his face, and staring at the closed doors of the library. Near him stood Eleanor Graham.

"What's wrong?" snapped Norse.

"Nothing, I suppose, sir; but it's locked here, and no one has seen Mr. Ballion this morning."

Norse gave a sharp exclamation. “But did he sleep in that room?”

“Why,” interposed Carl, “when I left him at half-past eleven, he said he intended to work there until late. And I told Lieutenant Redsby that. He came on duty just as I was going out.”

“Your orders,” said Redsby, “were to disturb the family as little as possible. I slept for an hour or so on the divan over there; but I sleep like a cat. I don’t think he could have left the room without my hearing him.”

“But what are you waiting for now?” interrupted Norse. “Why don’t you knock?”

“We have, but they’re double doors and soundproof.”

“Right. I forgot. Well, then, get the keys.”

Redsby threw a forlorn glance at Eleanor.

“I’m afraid,” she said, and I could see by her eyes that she had slept little, “I’m afraid the keys are lost—those we used yesterday. I thought we had left them here on the table, but they’re gone. I’ve looked everywhere.” Her lips were trembling.

“Open the doors without them,” commanded Norse in a cold voice—the more expressionless because of excitement. “Get Roose to help you.”

But even for experienced men the stout oak proved difficult. It required ten minutes’ work before the inner door yielded, and we pressed forward to the threshold. As we did so, I saw Eleanor turn away, and sinking into a chair cover her face with her hands.

I understood now Ballion’s request for twenty-four hours. He was not the man to let himself be taken or led here and there, subject to others. He was too proud for that. I remember wondering with a nervous tremor how we should find him, alone in the great rich room filled with its treasures. Norse was in front of me. I saw him look right and left. I could feel his tenseness. Then he called suddenly.

“Mr. Ballion!” We had entered now, and I looked to the left at a vacant desk, then to the right between book-shelves and armor. Norse crossed the room at a bound and gazed along the other aisle. We followed him. We passed here and there peering, forth and back.

“By heaven,” cried Norse at length, “there’s no one here. The room’s empty!”

We all remained lost for a moment. Then as my wits returned, I found I was staring at the narrow door in the angle of the wall, and there was pinned against it a square, white sheet. I pointed, but Norse had already seen, and now stood in front of it. Despite his haste, he detached the paper with instinctive attentiveness, and carried it over to the desk for better light. After a minute he raised his face, white, it seemed to me, with a frozen anger, and beckoned us.

"I was a fool," he said between thin lips, "a blind theorist. You were right. I'll ask you, though, not to touch the paper until I've examined it."

Looking down, I saw a typewritten statement, as follows:

> To whom it may import: On the evening of October 31, about eight o'clock, I entered Greyhouse secretly, and having concealed myself until the hour of one, I killed my wife, Celia Ballion, by strangling. Awakened by the light which I turned on next to the bed, she half rose, and, as I stood behind her, there was no difficulty in placing the thong. She died quickly. I let myself out by the door upon which this will be fastened. I wish to declare that I was entirely alone and unaided by any one. The unfortunate loss of my glove and the garrote, due to absurd carelessness, having rendered my position hopeless, I have no intention of furnishing the law with one of its rare victims. I take, therefore, the only course remaining, and will cross this threshold for the last time. As regards Celia, I have no other regret than my failure. It is obvious to any unprejudiced mind that strength must remain indifferent to ethics.
>
> I address this statement particularly to the attention of Captain Norse, who will find in it perhaps a useful moral.

And the paper was signed: Francis Ballion.

Chapter Six

RENAISSANCE STUDIES

An insensitive person would have shrugged off such a defeat as had befallen Norse, or would have covered it over with bluster. He, however, took it bravely. He showed no emotion at all. Not that he did not feel the humiliation, but because he felt it deeply—vitally. He was, I believe, for a time, in the literal meaning of the word, stricken. But he turned calmly to Roose.

"You patrolled the front of the house?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you think it possible that any one could have left that door yonder without your seeing him?"

Roose scratched his head.

"It was a dark night," he answered, "and the house frontage is long. I kept as sharp a lookout as I was able, and I'd hardly believe any one could get by me; but I couldn't *swear* that he did not."

The other nodded. I've seen a good many police officers who would have taken this occasion to inquire what Roose thought he was there for, and with so patent an opportunity have made him their scapegoat; but, though Norse could be severe, he was severe generally with himself, and just to others. Moreover, recrimination never alters a fact.

He compared Ballion's signature in one of his books with that found on the typewritten sheet, and pronounced the latter authentic.

"A little uncertain," he observed, "as if written under emotional stress, but otherwise quite the same." Then drawing a magnifying glass from his pocket, he set to studying the paper attentively, and it was some time before he looked up.

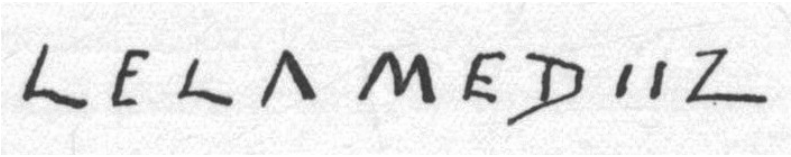
"Where's Carl Ballion?" he asked. But Carl had gone out to inform Eleanor of what had happened. "Look there, Ames," he said, handing me the glass, "what do you see at the bottom of the sheet?"

I saw what appeared to be scratches, such as one makes absent-mindedly with a finger-nail; but looking more closely they seemed to form a succession of distorted letters. Aware that certain people abstractedly at

times print their names, I attempted to reconcile these arabesques with the words *Francis Ballion*, but without result.

"Here," said Norse, tearing out a sheet from his note-book, "trace down exactly what you see and nothing else."

Thus enjoined, I arrived at approximately the following:



He compared this with the original and found it fairly accurate.

"I should have copied about the same thing—only your Z may be intended for an S and your II looks very much like a U. However, I want to examine this at home with a more powerful glass. Besides, there's probably nothing in it."

I couldn't imagine what he expected to find in it, and his curiosity on this point seemed to me trivial. I should have told him so, I think, were it not that I felt really sorry for him. I set it down to professional habit, forlornly operative when there was no longer any need.

He had finished examining the typewriter, which stood under its black covering near the desk, when Carl returned.

"By the way," said the latter, "you promised yesterday to show me why you thought that door there was closed by some one who remained inside the house."

Carl's face was drawn. He showed deeply the effect that this last turn of events must have made on him; but was endeavoring at self-control. There appeared to me this morning a greater likeness between him and Francis Ballion than I had yet noticed—the same depth of eye and power of will, graven deep in the face, which seemed a family characteristic. Perhaps there was a certain wistfulness in his question to Norse, as if even now he were hoping against hope.

But the former shook his head.

"I've given you enough theories which turned out blank; and I'd rather not discuss them any further. I'm not exactly popular with myself to-day. But perhaps you will tell me what impression your brother made on you last night."

"If you mean," said Carl, "whether I had the remotest idea that he intended anything like this, I had not. He seemed to me a trifle restless, a trifle uneasy, but that was natural under the circumstances. I stayed with him two or three hours; he showed himself very affectionate with me." Here Ballion's voice thickened. He paused. "I loved him in spite of everything," he added. "The only thing I recall which might have hinted at such action as this, was that he spoke of his will. It seems that he left me his heir."

"Under ordinary conditions," returned Norse cordially, "I should congratulate you. You're the kind of man, and in a position to use wealth in a wiser fashion than this," and he pointed at the room. "But perhaps you can tell me one last thing I'm curious about. Your brother had a famous collection of gems. Do you know where he kept it?"

"I don't. Perhaps at his bank. It will doubtless be mentioned in his papers."

"Certainly," agreed Norse. "Well, the case is over. I'm sorry for the part I played in it, though of course from your standpoint things are better so. I'll take steps to determine whether your brother is actually dead, but I have no doubts about that. A strange man he was. I wonder if you'd mind lending me when I go several of his books—those dealing with the history of the Baglioni?"

"Whichever you please," answered Carl.

At this point, a man entered to announce that the coroner had arrived, and we went out to attend the inquest. It was held in the great bedroom which had been Celia Ballion's. The colorless winter light fell gray on tapestries and frescoes; the bed with its gilded posts seemed more like a sculptured tomb curiously wrought in some rich burial vault, and ourselves intruders from a later, unsympathetic time. We, in our plain angular clothes, represented the matter-of-fact present with its security, its routine, its cherished mediocrity; our surroundings were the reflection of a more splendid but wilder past. It was as if the twentieth century held an inquest over the fifteenth. Celia Ballion had the right of it in her distempered fashion. Greyhouse itself might be modern, but its informing spirit was an echo, a memory.

I had leisure enough to reflect on all this during the rather dull proceedings. The late events were passed in an insipid review emptied of the passions that had vivified them. It was like the docketing of once sensational papers already faded. One after another the depositions were taken—a matter of routine, for Ballion's confession had rendered the coroner's

finding perfunctory. One by one the remaining actors of the drama described their rôles and were silent. I wondered idly how the course of these various lives, which had been brought together in a mutual shadow, would now shape itself, and in what different scenes—for Hasta, neat and inscrutable as always; for Eleanor, whose black dress and hair cast into sharp relief a face grown quickly older; for Norse in his restless trade; and for myself also. This afternoon, I thought, Greyhouse would belong definitely to the past. There was a round of visits; I had an absorbing case at the Emergency.

As the minutes passed, however, I was gradually impressed by the complete nonchalance of Norse's attitude, and ascribed it to chagrin on account of his mistake. He was hardly there at all, his body a mere shell that answered questions automatically, but otherwise vacant. His eyes, so to speak, had gone out. He reminded me of some Oriental ascetic who has projected his soul on an errand and continues meanwhile in apathy. When the expected conclusion had been reached and the inquest was over, he remained seated a moment and then left the room without a word.

But at this point an incident happened which, although in itself unconnected with what preceded or followed it, proved decisive in my experience at Greyhouse. It was merely that Eleanor Graham asked me to visit her maid, Anne Roderick, who had been taken ill earlier in the morning. I was told that she suffered considerable pain in the chest and throat, which had alarmed both of them, and as we went to Eleanor's room, where an additional bed had been installed, I learned something of her long service, of her unstinted devotion to the two sisters since Gordon Graham's death, and of Eleanor's warm affection for her. Irrelevantly I remember thinking at that moment of Francis Ballion's maunderings about his opened door and the spirit of Death abroad in Greyhouse. Even his hypocritical prophecy seemed to have found fulfilment. Since then, Death had struck once; I wondered if this meant that he might strike again.

On examination it appeared, indeed, that Anne Roderick had an inflammatory affection of the heart, which although not necessarily fatal, was none the less serious and had to be treated with the most vigilant care. Above all, for the present, she could not be moved.

"That means," faltered Eleanor, "that I can't leave, that I must stay here?" The droop in her voice indicated what effort of will she had used in remaining at Greyhouse thus far. But her implied suggestion had an unfortunate effect on the maid, who stretched out her hand in an appeal.

"Don't let me be alone here," she muttered, "not alone in this house with strangers. I'm afraid, afraid. It won't hurt me to be moved. Take me with you, dear Miss Eleanor." And though I insisted that a nurse or several nurses could be sent, and that Miss Graham's presence wasn't in the least necessary, she took Eleanor's hand and kept drawing it toward her.

"Why, of course," said the latter, "of course, Anne, I wouldn't dream of going. You see," she continued, turning to me with forced cheerfulness, "I can't leave Greyhouse yet. You'll send a nurse, won't you, Richard? But," and her courage failed an instant, "who'll stay with us in this house? I've become so silly, so abject! I remember the things Celia used to say. I imagine I hear things at night—last night, for instance, though it was quiet, I thought I heard the wind, a cry such as the wind makes outside. Or was it a human cry? But frankly, I'm on edge. Richard, do you think it would be possible—" she hesitated, "that you could spend a few nights here? I know it's asking a great deal, but you can drive to town in fifteen minutes, and your office or hospital engagements wouldn't be disturbed. You're a doctor, and would be at hand in case of necessity. I suppose Norse would leave one of his men here, if I asked him, but that wouldn't be the same." She paused, then added, "Be perfectly frank, though, if it's inconvenient."

I should have liked to be perfectly frank; I should have liked to say that a request from her for any service I could render conferred an unspeakable happiness: that I would have gladly sacrificed any pleasure I knew of for this one of mounting guard at Greyhouse. But I remembered Carl Ballion and remained stoically conventional. It wouldn't be the least trouble, I answered; but the warmth of her thanks left me feeling no little of a Pharisee.

Having arranged to return that evening for dinner, I went down stairs and looked for Norse, who appeared at length from the service wing of the house. In reply to my question, he said that he had been investigating the basement to see what there was underneath the library.

"And you found?"

"What any one might have expected," he answered, "a very well lighted and empty cellar. I'm going to collect some books in Ballion's museum," he continued; "come on in, and wait for me. Then we'll drive back together."

Now, as I stood by the half-open doors of the library watching Norse pull down one parchment-covered volume after another, I became conscious of two voices in the hall outside, whose conversation for a moment I could not help overhearing.

“But we’re engaged, Eleanor. Surely if any one stays here I have the right.”

“Don’t you realize, Carl, that just for that reason you can’t?”

“Why, perhaps.”

“Besides, dear, after what has happened—” She paused.

“Well?”

“After what has happened our announcement must be put off a while.”

“Why? What difference does it make if we care for each other?”

“Not to us, perhaps, but to the world. You won’t mind waiting, will you —for my sake?”

“No—a hundred times. I’d wait forever. But it makes me mad to think of this other person here with you, while I—”

At this point I managed to close the inner door, an unwilling eavesdropper, and one exceedingly crushed as well. Gone the unreasonable delight that Eleanor’s request had brought. Gone the renewed whisper of an absurd hope. I was well lessoned and in time. Of course, I had resolved not to think of her in that way, and had realized sensibly that she was beyond my reach. And of course subconsciousness had continued stubbornly to cherish its own impossible fiction. But it was good for me to recognize definitely the harsh fact and make the best of it. What I had heard was like a biting astringent. It would smart for a while, but the cure would be quicker. Perhaps. Only I began to fear the ordeal of meeting Eleanor alone that evening, and maybe a number of evenings. It would be Spartan discipline.

Norse, who had finished his selection, now deposited an armful of books on the desk.

“There’s a thousand and one hours’ reading,” he remarked. “But what’s the matter? You look depressed.”

“Oh, no,” I replied, and prevaricated mildly, “perhaps it’s the idea of having to spend some nights here at Greyhouse. It’s not an enlivening place.” And I told him of Anne Roderick’s illness.

He looked thoughtful at first, and then consoled me by wishing he had my chance.

“What for?” I wondered.

“So that I could study here,” he replied, “of an evening, and be undisturbed. But,” and he rubbed his hands, “it’ll be convenient to have you available.”

I caught him up impatiently.

“What are you driving at? This case is over, Norse.”

“What case?” he returned. “Oh, that one! Why, naturally it is. I’m simply beginning a study of the Italian Renaissance, and this would be an ideal place to work in. But as I say, you can help me.”

His manner was irritating. In the case of any one else, I should have considered it a weak attempt at humor, but here there was evidently a counterpoint of irony.

“How?” I asked in reply to his suggestion.

“Why, this way: I’d like you to open the Door of Death for me to-night at one o’clock.” And when I stared, “No, it’s perfectly serious, damned serious, in fact. Listen: buy an electric torch if you haven’t one. Your bedroom window opens to the west. You will see my pocket-lamp flash twice. Return me the same number of flashes as a sign that you are coming down, three in case you are detained, four if for any reason you can’t come at all. These broken locks,” he continued, pointing at the doors, “won’t be repaired by to-night. All you have to do is to unlatch that one for me over there.”

“But in the name of heaven,” I said, “why all this to-do? I can open the front door for you, if you choose to come at that unearthly hour. Otherwise, ask Carl Ballion’s permission to spend the night here, and continue your studies as you will.”

His answer was in the previous bantering tone.

“That, my dear Ames, would spoil everything. The Italian Renaissance can only be properly understood by putting yourself in the appropriate atmosphere—night, stealth, mystery. I not only won’t ask Carl’s permission to stay here, but,” and his face sobered, “I forbid you to breathe a word of my intention to any one. And I want you to open that door. Will you?”

“Of course,” I answered, “if you set such store by it. But can’t you give me a hint of what it’s all about?”

“I have. I’ve told you I was interested in a certain historical period.”

“That’s nonsense, of course.”

“No, it’s literally true. But what further interests I have, I don’t intend to tell you now—or perhaps ever.”

“Very well,” I said stiffly.

Norse put his hand on my shoulder.

“I’ve been talkative so far; but as we agree that the case is over, I’d prefer to keep quiet about my scholarly pursuits. You oughtn’t to object to that; I’m sensitive to ridicule. But just to show you what a rich subject for archæological speculation this museum offers, I wish you’d come here a moment.”

He led me to that end of the room where were assembled the ugly instruments Carl had pointed out to us yesterday. They looked even more like utensils of the devil’s kitchen than ever.

“This,” said Norse, indicating what I have already mentioned as a sort of bench covered with a rug, “this escaped our attention yesterday; but filled with antiquarian zeal I came down to examine it after the inquest.”

In its disguised form, the object in question resembled a moderately low divan about eight feet long by three wide; but when Norse pulled off the covering there appeared an arrangement unlike anything I had ever seen. It vaguely recalled a trestle of stout beams supported by four posts. At each end, on opposite sides, was a crank, whose operation evidently served to increase the distance between the last and next to last beams both at head and foot. On the end cross-bars there were fastened sectional pieces of leather like a tube cut lengthwise, but which hinged together to form a whole. The two halves were connected by rods provided with large wing-nuts. Moreover, I observed that when Norse manipulated a crank, in addition to the increased interval between the cross-pieces already noted, that beam next to the end began to rise vertically.

“Now observe,” said Norse, “the ingenuity of the period in which I am specializing. We have here a real pianoforte of pain. The forearms and calves of the victim were enclosed in those leather sheaths; but his arms were forced up to them from behind. He was therefore not entirely recumbent, but was half supported at an angle formed by the tension of his arms. The sheaths, or rather vises, could be tightened no doubt progressively to any painful degree. But now, when the crank is turned, there begins the slow elongation of the body which lifts the bones in their sockets. No doubt the arms are first dislocated. Yet notice that there is an additional upward tension communicated by the vertically rising cross-piece. If now from

above we attach these cross-bars," and he pointed to them covered with leather along the sides of the framework, "you have an instrument which breaks the arm and leg bones at the same time as the body is pulled apart. In other words," added Norse, with a fine rendering of scientific enthusiasm, "you have in one mechanism the rack, the wheel, and the Spanish Boot. And all, mark you, without causing one drop of blood. But the man who has passed through these operations is no longer a man: he's an inhuman pulp—helpless, twitching, crazed."

"Stop!" I exclaimed. "What's the use of dragging all this out of the past and dangling it in front of me?"

"The past?" echoed Norse. "Why, you have this fine specimen here before you. And one of the most interesting things about it—but feel those leather pieces inside."

I did so, and noticed they were moist.

"It's like oil," I suggested.

"Yes," he returned, "or *sweat*."

And as I stared at him, puzzled, he drew the rug back again into place.

"You see," he added, "to what interesting observations a study of the Renaissance may lead."

But beyond this doubtful saying he refused to explain himself.

Chapter Seven

THE UNDERTOW

I felt rather than observed a change in Carl Ballion's attitude as the three of us drove back together. It was not coolness so much as an alert and critical appraisal, the sort given to those who, from casual acquaintances, are on the point of becoming factors in our intimate concerns. But when these concerns revolve about a young and attractive woman, there is apt to be more suspicion than benevolence in the scrutiny, and more jealousy than either. And somehow I had the intuition that Ballion's jealousy could be scathing and relentless, that it was safer to filch barehanded the quarry of a lion than give an impression here of intruding. Not that I admired him the less for this—it was merely an aspect of his character and energy; nor above all could I blame him; but as I had not the slightest desire to intrude, his possible uneasiness left me embarrassed.

When we had dropped Norse at the police offices, he gave me a suitably veiled warning.

"How long," he asked, "will it take before Anne Roderick can be moved?" And when I answered doubtfully, he exclaimed: "Poor Eleanor, she's been under a dreadful strain, and Celia's burial to-day means a new effort. I hope you'll see that she gets away from Greyhouse as soon as possible."

I replied that I had urged her to leave, that she needed a change badly, and that I would do my best.

"She's been there a year," he went on, "since Celia's condition grew worse. So far, I've been able to take her out a good deal, and she's had some distraction; but now that's impossible. The place will seem a prison to her, and I don't want her to detest it, because (this is strictly between you and me) we expect to live together there some day."

I congratulated him with real feeling, for if there was ever a man who by reason of personal charm and attainments deserved Eleanor Graham, it was he.

Nor was I so ungenerous as to deny him my sympathy that because of Francis Ballion's crime his relations with the girl he loved had become problematic, and their final happiness postponed. I think my manner

reassured him. He thanked me for staying at Greyhouse; but hoped I would not long be inconvenienced.

"Of course, I feel safer in having you there. If I can do anything, let me know. And at any rate I'll be out for dinner occasionally."

But the implication, perhaps fanciful on my part, was that he intended to exercise friendly supervision. After all, I reflected, there was Italian blood in Carl Ballion.

He need not, however, have been concerned. Now that, so to speak, the vague allurement of a doubt had passed from my interest in Eleanor, I was conscious of my nightly attendance at Greyhouse as an act of professional altruism. And that is distinctly a mild emotion. Indeed, that night after a hard day of office work, visits, and hospital engagements, I felt a growing disrelish toward returning to the solitary, if splendid, mansion. Apart from recent events, which had transpired there—the crime and sorrow that darkened it, and were sufficient to render any house depressing—I was conscious of a special atmosphere, an illusive menace peculiar to the place, which had impressed me on the evening of my first arrival. I believed that even under normal circumstances Greyhouse would have produced the effect of detachment and mystery. Never had the club presented itself as more cozy and human; never had I a stronger inclination for the company of my fellow men than to-night as I motored out along the country highroad. No doubt, because of Mrs. Ballion's funeral that afternoon, Eleanor would leave me to dine in solitary state under the ministrations of the sphinx-like Hasta, and afterward I would sit by myself in the great hall before the stone fireplace. Or perhaps I could seek amusement in the books or other curios of Francis Ballion's museum—I shuddered at the notion. Then too, after a gloomy evening, there was this fantastic midnight visit of Norse's to watch for, so that I was denied even the solace of bed. I felt no little ill-used and put upon by the whole arrangement—an attitude which, if compared with my alacrity at Eleanor's request of the morning, will indicate what difference there is between sentimental interest and mere friendship. It was with leaden resignation that I handed my valise to Hasta and climbed the wide staircase to my room.

Anne Roderick's condition had remained unaltered during the day. The nurse I had sent was in attendance, and I found Eleanor at the bedside. It was evident that the day, with its last ministry to Celia Ballion, had been hard for her, and, as I had supposed, she preferred to dine alone.

Therefore, my forebodings being fulfilled, I sat by myself, watching Hasta glide forth and back in the dim expanses of the dining-room. Beset by the silence, I even attempted conversation with him, but he remained politely uncommunicative, and I was left to my own thoughts. They were largely concerned with the personality of Greyhouse. I use the word advisedly, because it was something different from the impression produced by mere plan and decoration. It was not unlike the instinctive recognition in a dark place of something imminent and living, the oppressive sense of an observant, lurking overseer. Or, to put it differently, I felt a mentality *about* me, a circumambient thought, as if I myself had become a concept in the mind of some one else. And this mind exerted hypnotic pressure. It was as if this agency, or whatever one might call it, were bent on dissolving me in its own thought-processes, making me one with itself—just as in a crowd individual psychology is dominated and absorbed by that of the mass. I found myself reacting against it in a sort of panic, as if my individuality were at stake. But the pressure continued; I lost headway as if against an unremitting undertow. For instance, it was with a sense of surrender, of having the impression thrust upon me, that I became conscious of a strange familiarity in my surroundings—the kind of paramnesia which induces a belief that one has seen an absolutely new place before; only here the impression was more vivid, and resembled the recognition of a formerly well-known scene which has remained unvisited for many years.

I say this conviction impressed itself as something foreign to my own mind, just as one succumbs to chloroform. I could not rid myself of it by any argument. I repeated in vain that Greyhouse was comparatively modern, that I had not set foot in it before two nights ago; but for all that the sense of an unwelcome intimacy continued, and at length I was forced to set it down as a result of fatigue or solitude, and accept it. This, however, was not enough. One breach, as it were, having been made in my resistance, the invading current penetrated deeper. I was startled during the evening by ideas that I could have sworn were not mine, that bore no resemblance to my usual thought, and that I resented involuntarily as an intrusion from without, but could not expel.

As an instance of this, I became suddenly aware that I should like to possess Greyhouse, or rather subject myself to it, be possessed by it—a most outrageous notion, because at the same time I knew that I loathed the place, that it contradicted every taste I had with regard to coziness and home-like attraction; but none the less this idiotic craving insinuated and persisted, wresting away, so to speak, a certain area of thought.

Against this fantastic imposition from nowhere my mind continued to struggle. I recalled in succession the day's events, what patients I had visited, what were to-morrow's problems; and yet at the end of every avenue I found myself back at Greyhouse. After all, even Norse's untimely visit at one o'clock would be a relief. What, I wondered, did it portend? What were the reasons for his secrecy? He admitted himself that everything had been satisfactorily explained by Ballion's statement, but had he further suspicions in spite of it? Then of what, or whom? Of Hasta?

I watched the butler moving to and fro, competent, silent—a noiseless man, who accorded with the stateliness around him like its own shadow. He kept his eyes lowered, but one knew that he observed everything. His step was like the easy swing of a panther. Beneath his black, tight-fitting coat there was a compactness that warned of muscles coiling and uncoiling, effortless. If there were any one left to suspect in view of Ballion's confession, surely this was he. At the conclusion of dinner, I saw him lift my arm-chair of massive walnut with one hand, as if it had been a feather, and place it against the wall. It would have taken my entire strength.

I spent an hour afterward before the fire, uneasy and depressed. Not for a moment could I rid myself of the impression already described—that sense of being observed and mentally invaded. The stroke of ten was an excuse to go up for a final visit to my patient. She was asleep. Eleanor had retired, and having instructed the nurse to call me if necessary, I went back to the gloomily splendid room I had occupied on my first night at Greyhouse. There remained three mortal hours to spend awake until Norse's arrival.

Somehow or other, I got through them, although in a feverish tedium I should not like to repeat. The circumstances of my last vigil there were too recent, the identity of hour and place evoked too clearly those other hours with their grim aftermath. I could not wholly prevent a return of the former apprehension, and feared without reason to fear. What was it that haunted me? The house itself, perhaps the dense silence. My head throbbed as if worn out in its useless struggle against nothingness. And again returned the craving, a tormented passion, to be subject to this place, the exotic beauty of it, as though to the power and caprice of an imperious mistress.

At one, I turned out the light and waited in darkness near the window for the flash of Norse's lamp. Some time passed. Then at length, startlingly distinct, it flared and was gone. I replied with the covenanted signal, then opened my door quietly and stole out along the corridor. It was like school-boys at some game of hide-the-lantern, I reflected, and was feeling no little

ashamed at my part in it, when suddenly I realized that I was not the only one astir in the house.

Unmistakably, some one was moving in the hall below.

There was a night-lamp burning on the stair landing, and I had about reached this when I heard the first sound. Advancing now with still greater caution, I stood looking down along the flight of steps into the hall. There also a single light transformed, though dimly enough, the space below to a kind of spectral chiaroscuro. And at the foot of the stairs stood the figure of a man.

When I first caught sight of him his head was turned toward the library doors, and almost at once he himself moved in that direction. I heard him almost inaudibly shutting them, and concluded that he had come that way, but as the locks were not yet repaired they had probably swung ajar, and he wished to leave no sign of his passage. In this I judged correctly, because immediately afterward I saw his shadow rather than himself glide toward the hall-light and heard the click of an electric switch. Beneath me now extended a well of darkness. I felt instinctively that he was again approaching the stairs.

But who was he? Had Norse after all found some entrance to the house, and was he now coming to meet me? That seemed impossible, because I had seen the flash of his lamp outside only a minute ago. Then who else, and above all with what purpose, did he visit Francis Ballion's study at this hour?

I felt not unreasonably a chill of fear; but with it mingled I know not what superstitious horror. Was this a reënactment of that recent night? Was it the strangler fresh from his grave, condemned to play his part once more and stealing now to a ghostly victim? Should I in this semi-darkness have to face the dead and be confronted suddenly by unearthly eyes? Involuntarily I shrank back along the balustrade.

The night-lamp was so arranged as to light only the corridor; it left the staircase in complete darkness. But through the darkness some one was approaching.

And now occurred the first of those hallucinations (I have no other word) which were increasingly to haunt me during the following weeks. It seemed again that all this was familiar, that I had stood before as sentinel guarding a stairway at night, that I had waited as now peering in vain at the coming of an invisible assassin. The sense of craft and stealth, of man pitted

with man in blind conflict, beset me as though I had the stench of it in my nostrils. And almost before it happened, I knew what would occur.

A sudden mass of shade rose in front of me—a body shocked against mine—

With a gasp I staggered back, aware that I had been fumbling with the clip of my pocket-lamp. Its ray shot out now and framed in a suspended arc, not a foot distant, the face of Hasta.

At first, I believe, he was equally terrified. His lips parted in a grimace of fear. But almost at once he controlled himself. I saw the jaw set, the eyes narrow; a movement of his hand thrust aside the torch.

"Who are you?" he whispered. "Oh, the doctor, eh?"

For a moment we stood confronting each other in silence.

"What are you doing, Doctor," he continued in a queer, purring voice, "alone, wandering in the dark by yourself? It might be dangerous. I might have taken you for an outsider." There was the faintest sparkle. I saw a knife in his hand.

"And what," I returned, regaining some measure of assurance, "were you about? What were you doing in Mr. Ballion's room?"

"Oh, that's easy, Doctor,"—I hated his inflection of my title—"that's easy. I was coming to bed, and noticed the doors were open. I wanted to see if everything was right."

"Well," I told him, aware that I had an account to render, "I heard your footsteps and came out to look." It was strange that he should seem to be listening to me with such intense eagerness. "I saw you at the foot of the stairs and then go back and close the doors. I'm glad it was only you." His attention lessened. I noticed that the knife had vanished.

"Quite right, Doctor. You weren't in bed, I see. You're a late sitter-up," he purred, "just like I am. It's quiet to-night, eh? You can hear better when there isn't any wind."

I had retraced my steps along the corridor, since it was necessary now to let the butler disappear before opening for Norse. As we passed the door of Celia Ballion's room, Hasta crossed himself.

"Good night, Doctor," he muttered, "good night, sir."

I entered my room and locked myself in. But the sound of his footsteps as he moved off brought back a sudden memory. It appeared to me that I

heard them *rather by weight than impact, like the padding of a beast*. Could it be, I wondered, that Norse's mystifications concealed a serious purpose, that after all the case was not over? I remembered the knife so dexterously poised in Hasta's hand.

Upon returning to the window, I saw Norse's signal outside repeated and again repeated, as if with a certain nervousness. I replied with three flashes to show I was detained, and then sat down to wait. It seemed prudent to allow the butler full time for retiring and I decided to give him a half-hour. As it turned out, this was none too much, for I was on the point of once more leaving the room, and had approached the door, when its handle turned slowly, and a slight pressure was evidently exerted from outside. But why, if it were he, did he wish to know that I was still there? What business was it of his? Only the thought of Norse prevented me from throwing the door wide. There was a space of silence when I knew that some one in the corridor was listening; then a sense of weight removed, and it was equally obvious that the listener had gone. I waited another quarter of an hour before flashing to Norse that I was setting out.

This time no incident of any kind happened. I reached the library, crossed it, and found the curiously shaped key on its row of books. In another moment I had opened, and the lithe form of the detective slipped in like a shadow.

He seemed to me unusually white and constrained in the dimness of a bracket lamp I had turned on upon entering. I was almost under the impression that his hand trembled as it rested a moment on the desk. At any rate, he sat down breathing deeply, and said nothing.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Have you seen a ghost?"

"No—but have you? You look played out, Ames."

"I've seen a pretty substantial one," I replied, conscious of relief in hearing a familiar voice again. And I told him of my encounter with Hasta. "I'm beginning to believe, in spite of Ballion's confession, that there's something wrong with the man."

"Humph!" said Norse, but whether in approval I couldn't make out. Then, without other comment, "Look here, don't you think you'd better excuse yourself to Miss Graham, and let me put one of my men here if she needs a watchman—not that I think she does—?"

Such was my weakness after the moil and fret of the night that I would gladly have accepted Norse's proposal, had self-respect permitted it. As it

was, I could only tell him that if Eleanor wanted me I could see no way of lying myself out of a few tedious nights.

"Well," he answered, "I can understand your point of view. And I was never yet for advising any man to play the coward."

"It isn't a question," I interposed, "of courage or cowardice."

"Your pardon," he retorted, "but it is. Just that. Not long ago, in this very place, Francis Ballion spoke of the spirit of Death abroad in this house. He spoke true.

"Now let me give you a piece of sound advice—indeed, I'm going to exact a promise. If you insist on remaining here at Greyhouse, you'll do three things: first, you'll spend as little time out of your own room as possible and you'll keep your door locked; second, you'll buy a revolver and have it ready; third, you'll see as little as possible of Eleanor Graham." On the point of interrupting him, his hand stopped me. "And let me add that I'm not at liberty—in fact, it would be a criminal blunder—to give you my reasons for this. But believe me," and I was impressed with the earnestness of his tone, "they are not imaginary."

"What in heaven's name," I retorted, "has Eleanor Graham to do with your mystery?"

"Let us put it this way," he evaded. "She has been a year at Greyhouse, and, it's reasonable to suppose, has been drawn into its atmosphere—do you deny that it has a curious atmosphere? No; well, I should like you, if possible, to escape contagion."

"Do you or do you not believe," I asked bluntly, "that Francis Ballion killed his wife, as the signed statement he left declares?"

Norse shook his head.

"I won't answer that—I can't answer that now. But I'll go this far. I believe that behind the criminal, whoever it may be, stands another criminal, the actual one, strong and ruthless. It is that I am groping toward. 'We strive,' " he added, " 'with principalities and powers.' Do you recall a word you told me was used by Celia Ballion—the French word *revenants*, those who return? I have come to believe she was speaking not fancy, but literal fact."

"Norse, you are mad."

"No, but I'm in pursuit of the strangest quarry man ever sought."

“But this,” I argued, “is not a matter of spiritism.”

“What,” he answered coldly, “do we know of spiritism or of spiritual laws? But I’m wasting time, and it’s already late. I want to search this room for various things in connection with my Renaissance interests: in the first place, to find if possible an architect’s plan of Greyhouse, and secondly, some mention of where Ballion left his gem collection. I’ve learned that it isn’t at his bank. For that, I’m prepared to rifle the desk here. Then you recall those scratches we tried to decipher this morning?”

I nodded.

“Well, under a strong glass it was easy enough. I read them now as: HELP MEDUSA. The thing’s no less baffling, of course. Why should this appear on the sheet of his confession? Was it done in a fit of superstitious abstraction, or does it point to something? That’s the question. And the only Medusa here is the one inset before the narrow door.”

He got up and strode over to the place mentioned. As I have already indicated, it was a slab of gray marble similar to the others which paved the room, and differing only in being carved with a woman’s upturned face. A conventional serpent, wreathing the forehead, identified it; but, for the rest, the face was singularly beautiful.

Norse stared down.

“I can make nothing of it. If I only had a plan of Greyhouse! And yet perhaps it has no significance.”

“Why don’t you ask Carl Ballion?”

“From now on,” returned Norse, “I hunt alone. And by the way, our meeting here, everything I have said, is confidential, you understand. But what’s this?”

I saw him pick up a small white object about three feet from the Medusa face. In the obscurity, it resembled a white carnation; but as he raised it I saw that it was a small handkerchief.

“What’s this?” he repeated. “I’d take my oath it was not here this morning.” He spread it out on the desk. “So!” he exclaimed, pointing to two embroidered letters, “the pendant of the glove, isn’t it?”

But as I looked I saw it was a woman’s handkerchief, and I saw the initials of Eleanor Graham; and above all I saw, as Norse’s finger moved from one to the other, that it was flecked with crimson spots.

“Blood stains,” he muttered. “And as we cast about in the dark, time passes, time is gone.”

I stood looking stupidly at the square piece of lace. And once more came that alien tyrannic sense of the familiar, of something intangible closing around me. I felt Norse’s hand on my shoulder.

“You needn’t wait,” he said. “I’ll be some hours here, and besides I can explain nothing. Get some sleep—but above all promise me to take care.”

Now, as I went back to my room, lost in perplexity about all this, it may have been fancy, but I thought I had a glimpse of a shadow that moved and disappeared at the end of the corridor.

Chapter Eight

"UNEXPECTED THINGS"

So for Norse, then, the case was not over. And as for myself, his insinuations and reticences, my own adventure with Hasta, the finding of Eleanor's handkerchief, had left me uneasy, but hopelessly confused. For why, after all, should there be any further doubt or problem? We had a signed confession, inculpating himself and exonerating every one else, from the one to whom all other evidence pointed as guilty. This was plain fact, and seemed to close the matter. But if, in spite of it, Norse remained unconvinced—and I admitted that the night's developments made him appear not altogether unreasonable—whom did he suspect? Presumably Hasta. But then he had spoken of some other agent, behind and unknown, toward whom he was groping.

With the purpose of ordering my own thoughts, I attempted to view the sequence of events from Norse's standpoint. On Saturday evening Celia Ballion had been killed. He had obviously considered the glove, the strangling thong, and the shadow seen by Eleanor as a possible effort on the part of some one else to implicate Francis Ballion. Why? Because, in the first place, they appeared too grossly incriminating, and secondly, Ballion had refused to attempt an alibi. But Norse had other reasons besides, which he had not explained. I recalled the tracings of footsteps made by Roose, and wondered if there were any connection here. Possibly, but I could get no further in this direction. One thing certain, however, was that Norse had believed in some confederate within the house, though again I was ignorant for what reason. Moreover, he had not considered Francis Ballion a hypocrite. Good: all this was undoubtedly his attitude before the discovery of the signed confession. But what had occurred afterward which would cast doubt on that unequivocal statement? It was here my confusion began. I recalled his antiquarian interests in the Renaissance and could make nothing of them. Then followed the recent happenings—his furtive visit to Greyhouse, the absurd phrase he had discovered scratched on the paper, his interest in architectural plans and Ballion's collection of gems, and finally Eleanor's blood-stained handkerchief. All this hung together in his mind somehow, but I could not find the connecting thread. If it were not for the handkerchief which, together with him, I was sure had not been overlooked the preceding morning—if it were not for this and the unaccountable behavior of Hasta, I should have considered the detective's suspicions

ridiculous. But here again I was baffled; for precisely those things which had impressed me had seemed to leave him relatively indifferent, as if, in fact, he took them for granted. That he knew more than he told me was clear, but it remained his own secret. And this very secretiveness, in place of his earlier confidence, was another enigma. Why should he doubt my discretion?

I looked at the matter from a different angle, and asked what advantage any one but her husband would derive from the death of Celia Ballion. No one benefited except him and Eleanor; and as for the latter I refused to entertain any imbecile misgivings. But then what had Norse meant by speaking of her as having been drawn into the atmosphere of Greyhouse, and warning me to avoid her? It was a new riddle. On the other hand, that there could be any motive beyond greed or marital antipathy in connection with so inoffensive a person as Mrs. Ballion seemed utterly incredible.

I called up in review every one even remotely connected with the case. Take, for example, Carl Ballion. Putting aside all other circumstances—his reputation, his position, his fondness for his brother and Celia—how could he benefit from his sister-in-law's death? These were preposterous conjectures. There remained, of course, Hasta; and yet, failing a motive, he could only appear in the light of the confederate Norse postulated.

No, at every turn the mind was brought up sharply against Francis Ballion's signed statement. But what if, conscious of discovery, as in fact he had declared, this paper had been written to throw pursuit off the scent by its suggestion of suicide, and he had made off, taking his collection of gems with him? Could that be the reason for Norse's curiosity in regard to them? It was a hypothesis which clarified certain difficulties, and left others unanswered. It did not, above all, explain Norse's secrecy—unless (and this I considered a shrewd idea) he might be afraid that Carl Ballion was favoring his brother's escape and should be kept ignorant of the detective's suspicions. For, after all, it was singular that if Ballion had determined on suicide he should not have committed it at Greyhouse, and thus have given irrefutable evidence to his statement. Why should he take the trouble to hide himself for the purpose? And in support of this, I recalled his passionate answer to Norse's question as to whether he was sick of life: "I worship life as the only thing I know and have to worship."

It has seemed convenient, even at the risk of tediousness, to set down a summary of events up to this point; for it is here, as I look back, that I become conscious of a peculiar change in the process of memory. If what

follows may appear obscure, this very obscurity is a factor in what actually happened. Besides, I can only record events in the way I remember them.

To be explicit, the day following my rendezvous with Norse marks a confusion of two personalities, the coalescing of two minds—my own and that diffused insistency of thought which haunted Greyhouse. In retrospect, it reminds me of a curtain of mist dividing the clear and accustomed from a nebulous uncertainty: one moment a sharply defined landscape, the next a world of broken rays, distorted outlines, and dim illusions. Or, to change the simile—for it is only by metaphor that I can give some idea of what took place—the currents of my thought, tinted with their own individuality, mingled at this juncture with other currents, and were interwoven to a strange duality of coloring. At no time did I cease to be conscious of myself, aware of my own past, present, and future; but I suffered from the confusion with mine of another background, another method of perception and feeling, through which, as through a superimposed lens, I looked at things. The result of this, as far as memory goes, is a displacement in the sense of reality, a blurring of outlines, so that with regard to certain matters I am in doubt as to whether they occurred or were purely imaginary, or were the distorted reflection of something else. Accordingly, where I have been unable to check them against the witness of others, I can only submit my impressions for what they are, without affirming their accuracy.

But before describing this doubtful and, as it happened, perilous experience, let me record one event which I remember distinctly, as if it were the last point unobscured by later vagueness. It was simply that upon leaving my office the following day and having glanced at a paper, I saw a headline which reported the finding of the body of Francis Ballion.

There it was in full: a corpse wearing Ballion's clothes had been discovered in a wood near the river, but so badly disfigured by a shot-gun wound as to leave the face unrecognizable. There could be, however, no doubt that it was he. The shot-gun, or rather a short blunderbuss from his collection, lay close to hand. A watch engraved with his name and a sapphire ring (I indeed recalled that ring) had at once been identified by Carl as those of his brother. Stature and build were the same. Apparently also Captain Rae Norse had pronounced the body to be that of the late collector. Thus evaporated my hypothesis as to the gems and Ballion's possible escape. But would this last development finally convince Norse?

Before returning to Greyhouse for my second night as resident physician I called at the detective's rooms, and was lucky enough to find him in. But

his manner was disappointing. He merely confirmed what I had read in the paper as if no other statement were called for.

"But," I exclaimed, "you don't even seem to be interested."

"Oh, yes, interested; but I thought the body would be found."

"And you have no doubt it was Ballion's?"

Norse laughed.

"Don't be absurd—why should I? Who else would be wearing his clothes, his watch, his trinkets? And besides, there were marks on the body that Carl identified. What room for doubt is there?"

"Well then, you'll admit this time that the affair is definitely ended?"

"Why, yes, *that* affair is. In fact, I had already admitted it." He fell into silence, eyeing me with a look of quizzical good humor. His smooth face, finely wrinkled at the corners of the mouth and eyes—eyes of a peculiar green—reminded me of a waxen mask. His seraphic benevolent expression showed just a trace of the imp. I was secretly nettled, but asked him casually whether he had found what he was looking for last night.

"If you mean architectural plans," he returned, "or a trace of the gems, no. It appears that Ballion was his own architect—possibly he destroyed the drawings. But I found this."

Opening a drawer of his desk, he took out a small photograph and handed it to me. It showed the semi-recumbent figure of a woman.

Evidently the original had been a painting, and no doubt recent, because the clothes worn were of the latest fashion. It was a woman whose face seemed vaguely familiar; but whether it was because I had actually seen her or because of the tradition in which she was painted, I found it impossible to tell. The artist had obviously conceived of his subject in the manner of the mid-Italian school—Titian, Bronzino, Veronese. The result was modern, but with an illusive reminiscence. She was half sitting on a divan, her chin supported by a hand, her face partially turned, so that the dark eyes looked out from the canvas and far beyond. They were the eyes of a dreamer, intent but languorous, as if tired of their own magnetic power. They saved the face from triviality, gave significance to the full lips, the irregular features, the indolent droop of her shoulders. A black evening gown accentuated her rather Latin beauty.

"Well," asked Norse, "do you know her? She's certainly a woman of society and breeding."

“I can’t be sure that I’ve seen her,” I mused.

“Think!”

But at the end I could only shake my head. He gave a mutter of impatience.

“No luck! not the slightest parcel of luck anywhere! I thought you might have known her. Well, that’s all I found.”

“But you ought to be able to trace the photographer or the artist, if you think it’s important.”

“It’s a private photograph and unsigned. The signature of the painting doesn’t appear, as you see. As to the artist, though, I can probably trace him, if it seems worth while.” He sat a moment, looking at me abstractedly. “You’ll notice one thing,” he went on, “that here, as in everything else which had to do with Ballion, appears the mark of a certain epoch, a certain historical period. He was a most consistent man.”

“Well,” I inquired, considering the subject over, “in view of all this, what becomes of your warnings to me last night?”

“I can only repeat them,” he returned, “and beg you to take precautions.”

“Why?”

He hesitated slightly—“Because if one case is ended, it doesn’t follow that another has not begun. Now listen, and above all keep quiet about what I tell you. I shouldn’t be saying as much if you were not returning to Greyhouse.

“I believed that some one closed the narrow door on the night of Celia Ballion’s murder, after some one else had gone out. I believe so still. Remember that it was a night of high wind, blowing straight against the door. Remember also that it opens inward. Therefore, in the first place, under those circumstances it would have been exceedingly difficult to shut from outside, for the purchase afforded by the exterior iron studs, although sufficient on a still night, would not serve for drawing the door to against a gale. But that’s not all. The position of the key as we found it on the book-shelf clearly indicated that it could not have been placed there by any one standing at the door. And if acting alone the person in question would have had to stand at the door in order to hold it half-closed against the wind, which would otherwise have disturbed papers, draperies, and so forth, in the room. Now, picture that corner of the library as you face it from outside—book-shelves to the left—and imagine yourself holding the door half-closed

while you go through the operation of removing the key and replacing it on the book-shelf. Tell me what would be its normal position—remembering that on account of the wind it would be the left hand that was used."

After a moment's thought, I answered: "The handle of the key would probably point toward the door. It might, however, lie vertically, as well as at an angle or horizontal."

"Quite so, but the one direction in which it would not lie would be as we found it—namely, with the handle turned directly away and at right angles to the axis of the door; this would mean a wrenching of the wrist beyond all necessity, unless we assume that even this detail had been considered. And that's nearly incredible. But granting that another person closes the door and remains inside, there is nothing about the position of the key to surprise us. Oh," he continued, "I grant you that all this hangs by a thread, but the thread seems to me strong. And besides, there's another matter: the footsteps you heard seemed to be passing along the corridor, but away from the main stairs. Now that leads where?"

"To the service wing," I answered.

"Yes, or past Eleanor Graham's room—but I won't press the point. In short, if I know anything about this affair at all, I know that more than one person took part in the crime that night, and that without doubt Ballion's confederate is still there—and if there, is surely alert and mistrustful of outsiders, particularly friends of mine who are encountered at one o'clock in the dark."

"But if you suspect Hasta," I returned uneasily, "why don't you arrest him?"

"Because I don't care to be made a fool of. I haven't the slightest evidence. And if I've mentioned this to you, it's simply that you'll keep quiet and keep your door locked and attend strictly to your medical duties. Forget everything else if you can. Otherwise things might begin to happen—unexpected things. Even as it is, I'm not sure. And my offer to replace you with one of the men stands open."

But I put this aside, although not with as much inner fortitude as Eleanor's protector should have had.

"What are you doing in the meantime?" I asked.

He smiled. "Would you really like to know? Will you be patient with me? Very well." He withdrew from among his papers a closely written sheet. "It's this kind of thing. Here's the record of an Italian family in the sixteenth

century." And when I burst out at him, "No, listen. I'll summarize it—it won't take long. The list is fascinating. There were two brothers, Guido and Ridolfo Baglioni."

And at this name I began to pay attention.

"That," continued Norse, "was in 1495. They had numerous sons and kinsmen, among the latter Grifonetto Baglioni. They had many palaces in Perugia and ruled the town between them. It was a family famous for three things—its wealth, extravagance, and personal beauty. One of the sons, Astorre, served Raphael as his model for St. George; another, Gianpaolo, set people staring as he passed by reason of his height and masterful bearing; another excelled in horsemanship and in lightness of step, so that—listen to this, Ames—so that no one knew of his presence if he came behind them. Do you recall Francis Ballion's lightness of step?"

I nodded, and I recalled, besides, that panther-like footfall outside my door.

"They kept horses, falcons, and hounds—they even kept lions, whose roaring at night terrified the good burghers of Perugia. They surrounded themselves with armed followers, although in strength and skill they were themselves a host, trained soldiers every one, leaders of free lances, *condottieri*. They filled their palaces with treasures of art, vessels of gold and silver, with scholars and servants, poets and jesters. Their women were beautiful and noble. What feasting at the marriage of Astorre Baglioni and Lavinia of the Colonnas! What draping of the streets in velvets and tapestries, showering of largesse, display of cloth of gold, what luxury of gifts! They entertained popes and princes, served as captains of the church or captains of cities—were called the magnificent Baglioni.

"That's one side of the coin. Look at the other.

"By 1560, in little more than two generations, they had vanished, leaving barely a trace. Do you know how?"

Norse's face looked older and drawn, I thought, although perhaps it was merely the gray of twilight which was closing in. His manner absorbed me: he was lost in his evocation of history. But I was conscious of something more—that suffocation of strange familiarity, the essence of Greyhouse. All day I had thrust it off; now, in this mesmeric hour, it seemed like a flooding tide. I recalled Celia Ballion.

"What became of them?" I asked, aware that my voice was strained. "I'm not familiar with their history."

Norse leaned toward me.

"They destroyed each other, for the most part. A few died in war. Astorre Baglioni, on that same night of his marriage, was stabbed to death in the arms of his bride. His cousin murdered him, as well as his father and brother. And then followed murder on murder, a thirst of assassination unquenched for sixty years. Gianpaolo arranges the killing of his wife, and at a banquet when the news is brought, redoubles the feasting. He slays two of his kinsmen, and in turn is done to death by a cousin, Gentile, bishop of Orvieto. But his son avenges him by killing Gentile and his two sons. And the feud continues, kinsman against kinsman—torture and knife and betrayal. The more fortunate fell in war. But it remained for one, as a Venetian phrased it, 'to put on the cap of Judas Iscariot himself.' It was Malatesta Baglioni—and he was the son and brother of assassins. He was captain of Florence in 1530. He betrayed the republic that had hired him as its leader, that was making its desperate last stand for liberty, corrupted its troops, cheated it with smooth words, undermined its defenses, and sold it into final slavery. Then he crept back to Perugia with his shame and his blood-money, to die in the midst of his magnificence there.

"It's an incredible story," added Norse, "which is none the less literally true. In this single family, it seems to me, you find the quintessence of the Renaissance.

"I've been collecting these facts from those volumes," and he pointed to a parchment-covered heap. "That's what I've been doing."

I began vaguely to understand, and felt not a little crestfallen at my earlier dullness.

"So you consider Francis Ballion an example of heredity? Gianpaolo and his wife, for instance—the Baglioni love of art and display."

It had grown too dark for me to see his face, but I detected a hesitation in his voice. "Perhaps," he muttered, and with unaccountable emphasis repeated it—"why, perhaps. But you are living at Greyhouse. I've told you all I can—it's for you to apply the moral."

Now, as I left Norse's rooms, I was conscious of a queer change in myself. In place of the reluctance which I had felt yesterday night upon returning to Greyhouse, I was aware this evening of an odd eagerness, an impatience to be back again in those high walls, to breathe the air of them, which to my thought had grown sweeter, more intoxicating. There was something trivial about these streets, something abject and drab—no, it was

more than that: they struck me not only as distasteful, but strange. And I perceived that the rôles had altered; what had seemed alien to me yesterday was now become familiar, what had been intimate—my daily life and concerns—had grown remote. It was not an unpleasant shifting—far from it, although accompanied by a feeling of laxness, an almost sensuous languor. I felt it a privilege to escape from the vulgar town, the featureless appointments of my rooms, the staleness of the club, back to an atmosphere of space and beauty. Life there seemed fuller, more splendid and intense, perhaps even because it concealed, as Norse hinted, the element of danger.

In other words, looking back I should describe it as a subconscious process continued from the day before. By degrees my instinctive antipathy had been corroded, weakened, destroyed, or rather transformed to liking and, indeed, craving. It is not an unusual phenomenon; only in my case, the circumstances, the suddenness of transition, were peculiar. But at the time, although alive to the difference, I thought little about it. I remember, rather, going over in mind Norse's account of the Baglioni, and singularly enough, instead of condemning their crimes, I felt a certain envy. Theirs were the days when life glowed warmer than now, under a bluer sky, more gorgeously appareled; its brevity was richer in sensation; its vividness, like a ribbon of lightning, sharpened against the shadow of death. I reasoned badly, if it may be called reason which was only fanciful glamor. Impending events were to enlighten me.

By this time night had almost fallen, so that I drove carefully through the downtown traffic, and at last about six o'clock emerged on the road which led to Greyhouse. Up to this point it had occurred to me once or twice, I remember, that the brakes needed tightening, but the defect was so small as to be inconsiderable. From here on there was a clear turnpike for about eight miles up to the plateau on which the house was situated. It went up in easy spirals, and although narrow was well made, so that one could drive at good speed during this part of the distance. I therefore switched on my headlights and advanced the accelerator.

The night was calm and still with already a suggestion of stars, and as I swept onward the thought occurred to me that in this aspect of romance, at least, our age had the better of the Baglioni. On such a night, how those magnificent ruffians would have speeded it under Italian skies; with what a fanfare of klaxons and contempt of law! Had the motor been invented then, what gusto they would have taken in it! There was little cause to envy them their jog-trot horses on such a road and night when the power of fifty horses

quivered under me. I drove between earth and stars at a pace that would have left behind even their falcons.

I took the curves right and left with hardly a lessening of speed, for it was a road I knew very well by this time, and it was little frequented. Most of the way there was a steep slope down on one side, topped by an embankment which formed a drop of from twelve to twenty feet; but there was no danger about it, at least in dry weather. One final curve above led out on the plateau where at easy distance could be seen the trees of Greyhouse. It was, however, less easily managed than the others, and here, slowing down a bit, I swung to the right and gave a tug at the wheel.

There sounded a faint click, the wheel turned slack as a broken neck, and without altering its direction the car sped straight for the embankment. I threw on the brakes; they failed to grip . . . I was already on the edge. . . toppling . . . toppling. . .

And there passed, like a barbed flash in the mind, Norse's words: "*unexpected* things". . .

Gone!

And at the same moment, I flung myself clear from the wheel and plunged down.

Chapter Nine

DEAD MEN'S WINE

It was surprise and shock that kept me for several minutes stretched out on the dry turf where I found myself. I was not even stunned, but it seemed to me that I should be; and I hated to move arm or leg for fear of finding them broken. The machine had crashed on beyond, and I was dimly aware of it twenty feet off.

At last I gathered myself and my thoughts together and, testing every movement, got up. But now, as I stood in a dazed way looking about, I saw a man lower himself from the embankment and come down as fast as the slope allowed. He turned on a pocket-lamp as he joined me, and by the light of it I discovered with some surprise that it was Roose of the Metropolitan Police.

"Doctor Ames!" he cried. "Thought I recognized you. Well, sir, believe me, that was a close call. I saw it from up there. Skidded, didn't you?"

"No," I answered shakily, "the steering gear broke."

"What!" His voice expressed wonder and doubt in one. "It was a new Marmon, wasn't it? That kind don't have defective steering gears. Let's have a look at it. But you're all right, aren't you? Nothing broken? Mighty good work you could swing free."

I was a trifle unsteady, but together we stumbled down toward the wreck of the car.

"What a damn shame!" muttered Roose.

The machine had turned turtle, and was now as gruesome a heap of twisted iron and wood as a few minutes past it had been the embodiment of grace and power.

"Insured?" he asked. I told him it was, and with a nod of approval he set about examining the steering knuckles—a task of no difficulty because of the upturned position of the car. "You'd a-been mashed flat," he observed. "I'd like now to see what was wrong. It looks queer to me."

With his torch full on the metal, he bent over, and I heard an exclamation.

"Look at that—" he pointed—"can you beat it!"

Stooping next to him, I followed the movement of his finger and saw what he meant. A clean, thin cut showed through the knuckle up to the last fraction of its diameter, which alone seemed to have broken.

"That's the work of a file," he muttered. "There wasn't any accident about it—the shot was aimed at you." Our uneasy glances met. I felt a nervous tremor pass through me. "If it hadn't been for your presence of mind," he went on, "you'd have been lying here now."

But who and why? Question jostled question at a loss.

"The man that planned that," pondered Roose, "was a winner—an ace, I'd call him. But it's mighty serious for you."

I was willing enough to grant the seriousness of it; but with a layman's impatience I couldn't help suggesting that the police might find a remedy.

Roose shrugged his shoulders.

"What's to be done?" he retorted. "We can't go arresting people at random. The Captain feels that there was something that wasn't cleared up in the Ballion crime—and this automobile wreck of yours would seem to prove it. But that's the queer part in the business. We're pulling against crystal-clear evidence, and we've nothing but suspicion to act on. Don't you understand? Of course, we'll look for the fellow who tampered with your car but," he added gloomily, "we won't find him. There's one thing clear, though, that whoever we're after is more than one or two people—it looks like a gang. Norse'll be interested in this."

I thought he might well be, but the term failed to express my own attitude. To be stalked for one's life by invisible pursuers whose motives were unknown seemed to me absorbing. I stood irresolute by the car, balancing uncertainties.

"If I were you, Doctor," continued Roose, "I'd arrange to leave town for a spell."

The suggestion angered me. A fine police protection this, when the only deliverance for a threatened man was to run away! He ought to know besides that staff consultants at large hospitals can't "leave for a spell" whenever the notion takes them—let alone that, in this case, there existed an element of pride. And that reminded me of Anne Roderick at Greyhouse.

"If you people," I told him, "can't keep me unmolested in my perfectly legitimate work, I suppose I'll have to see it through by myself. At all events, I'll have to be getting on."

“You don’t think you’d better go home for to-night?” he asked significantly.

But I answered “No” with more courage than I felt, and together in silence we climbed the hill and regained the road. In silence also, he accompanied me to the gates of Greyhouse.

“What brought you out here?” I inquired before parting with him.

“Oh,” he returned blandly, “some business along the road. I happened to be passing. Good night, Doctor. And by the way, have you got a gun? No? Well then, take mine.” He thrust an automatic into my hand. “Good night.”

And with this equivocal farewell, I was left to trudge along the cedar-lined avenue to the house. But it appeared, rather, an illusion I had entered, a shadowy corridor of the mind. For, as in a dream one lags interminably with leaden footsteps, so to-night the way seemed long; I felt confused, oppressed. The air hung warm and scented between the cedars like an emanation, a breath of some perfumed robe. I walked heavily in a kind of torpor—then of a sudden there flashed upon me, unreally vivid, the entrance lights, and I saw that I had reached the door.

This evening differed totally from the last. In fact, I never again dined alone during that period I spent at Greyhouse. Carl Ballion had arrived for dinner, and I found him and Eleanor waiting for me in the hall. To their queries and exclamations I returned a brief account of the accident, but withheld the discovery of the filed steering knuckle. Sufficient of Norse’s caution had been instilled to make me discreet, particularly in the vicinity of Hasta. So, treating the matter as lightly as I could, I went upstairs, visited Anne Roderick, whose condition seemed a trifle improved, and came down again after I had changed.

It was this evening that I first noticed a difference in Eleanor Graham. Whether it was a reaction from the recent strain, or whether she was nervously excited, or whether Carl Ballion’s personality acted as a stimulant, I could not tell; but her cheeks were flushed, her eyes brighter, her whole appearance more brilliant. She laughed and conversed with unusual gaiety, and though dressed in mourning, seemed to have forgotten the cause of it. And yet this expresses more than I mean, for I gradually became conscious of another mood which appeared submerged in the first. It was, for example, with a certain start that at one pause in the conversation I caught an expression of her eyes so haggard, so desolate, as to remind me strangely of

Celia Ballion; and once I saw her hand tremble as she raised her glass. But these were momentary shadows; they disappeared in a new flash of spirits. I had never seen her more lovely, more superb. And across the table, Ballion's eyes answered her.

We formed an odd group in this place so recently associated with other occupants, and as yet under the shadow of their death. Now, upon looking back, it seems to me utterly unreal; Carl in the chair of Francis, whose body had been recovered only that morning; Eleanor already in appearance forgetful of Celia's tragedy; myself but now escaped from death—the three of us chatting together as if nothing had happened: I say that in retrospect it strikes me as fantastically macabre. Strangely enough, at the moment, however, it seemed natural and of course as far as externalities went, there was nothing to censure; we were all of us outwardly correct; no reason existed why three friends should not dine together at Greyhouse, or why they should dine in silence. It was rather an unexpressed insensibility, a taint of coarseness that made itself felt; and it is precisely this that stands out in memory.

We breathed, as it were, an atmosphere sensuous and charged with strong currents, from which I no more than the others was immune. I had grown familiar with it, but not until now had yielded so completely to its influence. The sense of strangeness was gone. Greyhouse appeared to have established another norm for Eleanor and myself. As to Carl, I could see no difference.

"Francis had taste in wine," he observed, "as in most things. This Barbera, for example,"—he held his glass to the light—"this Barbera I'd recommend to any one with pale lips; it stains them red. What shades of garnet and purple! To you, Eleanor!" His glance kindled toward her as he drank. "The Ballions," he added with significance, "have always had a cult for the beautiful."

But implication whispered that dead men's wine lost nothing of its savor, and the smile she gave him in reply was even stronger wine.

The moments passed. It began to recur to me with new insistence that I was a fool to stand aside with regard to Eleanor, and that I had no obligation to Carl Ballion. I hated his airs of proprietorship; I felt a sudden flame of hatred for him. Why did he stand in the way of what I wanted? What preëmption had he in her—as if the love of women were not free field? Evidently, though, luck favored me. On account of his brother, their marriage had to be postponed, and postponements of the kind were ill-

starred. Then too I was in Greyhouse and could use my advantage. What did I gain from conventional scruples?

Now the queer thing about this was that I did not consider *her* attitude in the matter at all—it did not occur to me. I looked at her in a new light, as an exquisite object of possession, to be secured if possible in one way or another. And weighing how much I could bid in this auction as against Ballion, and vanity taking a hand, it seemed that I had more to proffer than sentimental humbleness had led me to believe. If he was prominent in his career, I was not unconsidered in mine. If he had a future, so had I. If he had acquired a fortune now at his brother's death, I was not without wealth, which might, indeed, prove ampler than that of the prodigal collector. True, she was rich and superior to these considerations. But in the grossness of thought which then controlled me, her wealth had become a factor; it added to her attraction, cast a heightened glamor about her. Now, for the first time, she seemed to me a prize—not only in the personal sense.

On the other hand, Carl Ballion had physical qualities that I lacked—handsomeness, dash, and bravura. But there clung to him his ill-omened connection with Francis. It would not be difficult to keep her mindful of that by casual insinuation. Why, he even resembled Francis—more to-night than ever, I thought. How could she forget what had happened at Greyhouse? How could she marry the brother of Francis Ballion without falsifying every decent sentiment? That was my best card, and I resolved to play it.

Her manner gave me a vague encouragement. She might have been expected, without any lack of politeness, to betray a greater interest in him than in me—such as is usual between two people who are engaged; but there was not a trace of it. Her impartiality struck me as intended to convey a hint; it was emphatic, and I was shortly aware that Carl was no less alive to the fact than I. For instance, when he attempted to center conversation on their mutual concerns, she kept drawing it away, reviving our experiences of last summer, the rides we had taken, the people we had met. And of course I played up to this, so that talk developed into a kind of seesaw, or rather soon enough turned to a tacit duel between him and me. And here I became conscious of two impressions: first, that Carl Ballion, after a curious stare which might have meant anything, grew outwardly more affable, more pliant, as it were; and second, that Eleanor seemed to sense a conflict and enjoy it. Her impartiality was equally provocative. One felt that the curve of her lips, the softness of her hair, that strange new smoldering of her eyes, included us both in a veiled intimation. Once or twice, I recall, it seemed to me that I was dreaming, that this altered relationship between the three of us

could only be a phantasm, and that I should wake to solid reality. But the illusion persisted—a sense of hate, greed, desire, cased in good manners, and all of this, like so many poison fumes, lying heavy between the paneled ceiling and tapestried walls.

My growing antagonism led to a breach of confidence.

"I've been concerned with your ancestry this afternoon," I told him, but the remark was for Eleanor. "It seems that Norse is still interested."

"Really?" he smiled. "Well, they *are* interesting, the Baglioni, though I should think a city detective might have more pressing claims on his time. And what was your verdict about them?"

"Oh," I laughed, "politeness forbids."

"Not in the least, Richard; I'm not sensitive. They were scoundrels, weren't they? I haven't my brother's information, but they were no doubt a bad lot. I'm exceedingly proud of them," he added.

"That's a question of taste," I answered.

"Why, of course it is—just so. They were rascals, to be sure; but they were princes, captains of armies, and patrons of art. At least they were not commonplace. I don't see why I should rather descend from Jones, Smith, or Jenkins, who were honest yokels; though doubtless," he continued suavely, "you have no objection in your own case. As you say, it's a matter of preference."

I had cut a poor figure in this exchange, and sat groping for an answer. The only retort that occurred to me would have been unpardonable, and would have left me in a still shabbier position, so that I was reduced to silence, and attempted to pass it off with a smile. There was a shade of pity, I thought, in Eleanor's eyes, as she glanced from me to Ballion, which nettled me all the more. How serene he looked!

"I have a real sympathy for Norse," he continued. "The case from his standpoint was bungled, and I know he feels humiliated. It's only natural he should want to save his face. But as long as he's taken you into his confidence, I wish you'd intimate to him that I hope he'll restrict himself to my ancestry. My respect for him isn't increased when he attempts to coerce a bank into letting him investigate my brother's papers. That verges on intrusion, and is outside his province. Though, of course, you needn't worry: I'll tell him so myself. I'll tell him he's like a dog with a picked bone—and I'm sorry it's picked, but what can I do about it?"

He spoke with humorous indignation that was perfectly genial. And breaking into a laugh: “But it seems to me everybody’s become inquisitive. Now what the devil, Ames, were you doing last night at such an hour prowling around the house?”

“What do you mean?” exclaimed Eleanor.

“Just that,” said Carl. “Hasta met him in the dark about one o’clock on the staircase. And,” he laughed again, “Hasta says the doctor looked pretty scared.”

His laughter was contagious. Eleanor smiled, and once more I felt the sting. It added heat to my answer.

“I thought I’d explained that to Hasta last night. I heard footsteps downstairs and went out to investigate.”

“Marvelous hearing!” returned Carl. “It’s a long way from your room to hear footsteps—or did Hasta wear boots?”

“Do you doubt my word?” I countered sharply. Strange, in this heavy air how the blood leaped up!

His gaze met mine steadily, but with an under-shade of scorn.

“And if I did? But steady, steady; your word has nothing to do with it. I was admiring your ears.”

The smooth voice was like oil on fire. Still eyeing him, I leaned forward.

“Then let it be in a less offensive manner, please!”

For a moment I saw the knuckles of his hand, grasping the coat lapel, turn white. It was all I saw. His face remained calm and indifferent as ever. What he would have answered, I don’t know, for at that moment Eleanor intervened sharply.

“I don’t understand this. I expect a little more regard from both of you. It seems to me you forget I am here.” And I was struck by the command in her voice—the almost scornful power of it. And the contrast rose illogically in my mind between her and the timid Celia Ballion.

It would be hard to say whether she prevented an open quarrel; I think not, for I don’t believe Carl found it convenient to quarrel. At any rate, with far better grace than I, and with no effort, he smoothed things over.

“The Barbera,” he explained ruefully, “and a misplaced sense of humor. My dear Richard, wander about Greyhouse whenever it suits you. And

certainly Hasta was mistaken in remarking that you looked scared. Is that enough, Eleanor? Can I be more apologetic? Well, well, I drink to you both." And he emptied his glass.

But his apology was from patron to inferior, and I noticed that he had not accepted my version of last night's encounter. I noticed also, on looking up, the eyes of Hasta, who stood behind him, fixed on me in strange appraisal. But as I looked they were at once lowered.

No doubt Ballion expected me to withdraw after dinner and leave them alone. In spite of conventions, however, which regulate one's behavior toward an engaged couple, I did nothing of the kind. I proceeded to sit him out. In this sultry mental atmosphere, which held something of hypnotic intensity, the spark of rivalry had leaped to a flame, had spread to a fire of dislike, or more properly hatred, which seemed out of all proportion and went beyond anything I had experienced. It was equaled only by a growing passion for Eleanor, which indeed included it, together with envy and jealousy. And there was a sense of exultation, however bitter, in hating a man and desiring a woman to this degree, a concentration and expenditure of life. Emotions both of pleasure and pain are nowadays schooled and diluted. I, at any rate, had never known so completely before what zest there is in the elemental. But as if our surroundings imposed their own suave etiquette, all this went on behind smiles and urbanity.

It went on a long time, as Carl was in no hurry to leave; and I confess I have never seen him more engaging. He discussed the coming elections where he was candidate for political office, the current and tendency of affairs, the notable people he had met in one sphere or another. He had a wide knowledge, a fund of anecdote, a shrewd critical talent. Nor could any one complain that he paraded himself. It was rather the other way, nor was there, I think, any hypocritical modesty in him. He became absorbed in a subject, seemed to luxuriate in the skill of turning it here and there, looking at it from different angles. I felt that he scorned and wished to be rid of me; but for the moment he tabled this, and indulged in the pleasure of thought, letting his mind range here and there. With him, talk never became gossip; but it never became heavy. He was a great conversationalist. He had, above all, I think, the keenest sense for human nature of any one I have met.

Truth demands that I give him his due, at least. But all this was no balm to jealousy. I sat with the consciousness of acting as foil to his charm. He scintillated the more because I could not scintillate at all. Tired, at one point, of remaining in the background, I introduced a subject in medicine, but he met me easily on my own field, managed to draw the topic out into its social

aspects, threw light on it now from one direction, now from another, and left me to my insignificance as before. And it did not chafe me the less to feel, as I actually did, that here at least he had no purpose to humiliate me. The subject interested him, and his mind probed faster and deeper; that was all.

Of course, Eleanor must have realized this disparity between us. I had the added discomfort of suspecting that she felt a little sorry for me, wanted to draw me out, show me in a better light. Perhaps for that very reason I was more awkward. Once, I recall, her glance moved from Carl to the stone falcon in relief above the fireplace, as if she found in one a comment on the other. Then she reddened when their eyes met, and she looked down.

Once also, I forget in what connection, she asked unexpectedly what his religion was.

"I'm a Catholic—an unworthy Catholic."

She brushed it aside with a laugh: "I don't mean your creed." And he joined her in laughing.

"Well, there *is* a difference—you are delightful to-night, Eleanor. Let me think: what is my religion! On reflection, I believe I'd say it was Greyhouse—you as you are to-night in Greyhouse."

"And what does that mean?" Her voice sounded a little harsh.

"Impassioned life," he answered; "simply that, no less. It's too short for anything more."

At a late hour he took his leave. "I'm sorry about your machine, Ames," he said. "An accident like that stupefies a man, I suppose. But you shouldn't drive too fast: it takes a skilled hand nowadays. No ill-will about our little contretemps, I hope."

"None in the least," I assured him. We looked at each other cordially, and I should have liked to throttle him.

Contrary to what I had feared, Eleanor did not propose retiring at once. Instead, she went back to her chair, and settling herself luxuriously: "Let's sit a while, if you're not sleepy. It seems an age since we were here together last."

Now at this allusion to our hurried conference on the night of Celia's death, one would have expected some accent, some trace of feeling to indicate that she remembered. But there was nothing except what might be

understood literally: that she was glad to be alone with me again. I noticed that her eyelids drooped, that her lips were half parted; her cheeks flushed, and her hand hung limp beside the chair-arm. I seated myself near her before the fire.

"It was lucky about poor Anne Roderick," she said in a suppressed voice. "I've become used to Greyhouse; after all, I'm glad of a pretext to stay. Besides, it's an excuse for you, isn't it? I believe you're coming to enjoy it, as well."

I was struck once more by an almost sickening impression of unreality that seemed to cross the mind, chilling and confusing it, like a shadow of old memory, and was gone. And yet what unreality? Why should I not be here at the side of Eleanor Graham? Why should I not desire her? Were not she and this place about us vivid and beautiful? But in the short, disturbing space, I recalled Norse's warnings and that I was transgressing them. I was above all to avoid Eleanor Graham, to keep to myself, to be on guard. Against what? Phrases dimly significant stirred in thought, Norse's earnestness, the memory of her handkerchief blood-stained beside the fatal door. Could it be, after all, that she was the one who, he believed, had opened for Celia's murderer? And then I was conscious of a strange realization: namely, that I did not care, that her innocence or guilt made no difference to me, that, if anything, its beauty was enhanced if that firm, slender hand had played with death. What guilt could affect her grace, or the coiled blackness of her hair, or splendor of the eyes? What relation had moral right or wrong to beauty? And I admitted that for me it had none.

"Yes," I answered, "I have grown to appreciate Greyhouse."

She extended her hand suddenly. "Why, then it's a bond we have in common."

At the touch of her fingers, whatever compunctions I had left vanished.

"Do you love Carl Ballion?" I asked.

If she answered that she did, it would make no difference to my suit. I should try in some way to supplant him. If she answered that she did not, my course would be easier, my hope more serene. But what she actually said came as a distinct shock; or perhaps it was rather her manner of saying it.

"Why, yes, I love him in a way. Oh," she laughed, "in several ways. My blood, so to speak, loves him. I burn to belong to him, be his chattel and pastime, do as he tells me, as I'll have to do when we're married. He has the body of an Apollo, and the will of Lucifer. Then besides, my mind loves

him. He has genius and enormous ambition. He's never dull-witted or humdrum. You'll admit there's grandeur in him. Well, that's how I love Carl Ballion."

"It seems to be enough," I answered, her hand still in mine. She made no attempt to withdraw it.

"Of course. It probably is enough," she returned; "but the very fact that I'm discussing him with you at all might show that there are reservations. For instance, I don't feel impelled to be exclusively faithful to him now or ever. I love him with body and mind: he attracts them both; but I shouldn't think I cared for him in another way, that used to seem important. Funny, I can't remember for the moment—oh, yes, I shouldn't say I loved him with my soul. But I wonder," and she smiled a little, "whether that isn't nonsense." Then, turning her eyes full on me, "Why are you interested, though?"

My amazement had passed as quickly as it came. It seemed to be the reflection of an outworn thought. There was nothing to be surprised at, that a charming woman rejected sentimental prejudice.

"Because," I said, "it was in hope that you might care for me. It was because I love you utterly."

Her fingers tightened. I heard her quick breathing, and her words: "To-night—why not?" There passed a blurring of consciousness. I know that her lips were pressed to mine. I recall the touch of her face, as if it were the softness of warm petals. A wave of incense, inwrought, as it were, with scarlet, closed about us. I forgot all other thoughts, except that for a moment I held her in my arms.

What we said, or whether we had spoken, escapes me; but I remember this at length, that she whispered, as if to herself: "How foolish Celia was! She refused to live. She was mistress here and refused the gift. She was a nun in Greyhouse—a pale nun. Think of it!" And with a laugh: "How much better dead!"

It was as if some one else had spoken: it was like a sharp ray glancing through a curtain ripped apart. I felt aghast for an instant. But the effect of what she had said on herself was transforming. She thrust me back, sprang up, and stood swaying before the fire, her face buried in her hands.

"It is over," she moaned, "it is over with me. What am I! What can I hope for! Tell me," she went on, "that you didn't hear. I didn't mean it. I couldn't have meant it." She sank to her knees. "Be good to me. Say you'll

forget what I've been to-night and remember what you used to think of me. You will: you'll be generous to me. You won't drag me on as Carl Ballion would. Leave that to him! I know what Celia meant now. She was brave; she stood it out; she died. Indeed, how much better dead!"

Breaking off, she looked up at me in entreaty all the more appealing because there conflicted with it that against which she was struggling. Her face had grown white as parchment, and from this blazed the misery of her eyes. It was as if we were both trying to keep our foothold on an outermost spur of land, and were being dragged back by the sea. She had called to me not only in realization but despair, and it was simply the instinctive impulse of pity, stronger even than the will that drove us, which enabled me at the moment not to fail either her or myself.

"You have done no wrong," I said. "It is I who have acted abominably, and it is you who have everything to forgive. But you are worn out by this past week—we are neither of us ourselves. I wish you would leave Greyhouse—you must!"

"If it weren't for Anne," she murmured, but I was aware already of the former tone in her voice—"if it weren't for her, I would—that is," she added, "if I had the power." Her glance rested again on the poised falcon of the mantelpiece. In the silence, it was as if one felt the lordliness of the hall. She smiled: "If I had the power."

But as we went up the stairs, I was conscious of no self-approval. The glow had passed. I had had my moment and let it escape. She was right: Ballion would not have played the fool. And all I had in return for my honorable performance was my own contempt.

"You're going in to see Anne?" she asked. "I've moved to the next room and won't bother this evening. Well, good night." There was perhaps scorn in her eyes, or was it merely indifference, as she turned away?

And I stood, angry and ashamed, near the bedside of the sick woman. It seemed impossible to recall just why I had let myself be impressed by Eleanor's hypocritical remorse. The dominant spirit of that evening resumed its hold. There would be other moments, I pondered, other incense-languid nights of sorcery, shut in from the canting, sanctimonious world by these strong walls.

. . . The nurse's voice ran on impersonally. She spread out her chart. Miss Roderick was better. I made an examination, gave some orders.

There would be other moments, and then a truce to pallid delicacies and feeble scruples. I was justly scorned for them. Carl Ballion was right.

. . . Half raising her head from the pillow, Anne Roderick spoke. “Would you mind, sir, telling the nurse to keep a lamp burning? I’ve grown that frightened. . . of the dark. . . as if some one. . .” she faltered. “It seems to me I know what Miss Celia felt.”

“Surely,” said I, “we’ll leave on the lights, but you have no cause to fear.” And thought continued its insistent beat, protest and craving—protest against self-denial, craving for self-release, the mill-race of the senses, the eternal surge of nature against will. And more personal, more compelling, as if focused upon me in almost painful convergence, I felt the driving of that spirit which seemed to haunt this place.

But there was something more. Was it fancy, clairvoyance, or perhaps sound, so minute as to be noted by instinct rather than perception?

I rose from the chair beside the bed and turned quickly.

There, eye to eye with me through the adjacent window peered a face, startlingly white against the darkness, and so menacing that I shrunk back as at the thrust of a knife, dropped my eyes from it in horror, and then found myself staring at vacancy through the empty pane.

Was this an abnormal projection of the mind, a visualized comment distilled from the thronging impressions of the last hours? At the time it seemed definite and actual, nor indeed since then have I been able to convince myself of its unreality. But standing as I did between Anne Roderick and the window, and as the nurse at that moment faced the bed, neither of them saw this apparition, and I can rely only on the testimony of my own eyes.

Moving deliberately, so as not to alarm the patient, I reached the window, but could hear nothing, and looking down could see in the light cast from a driveway lamp no trace of any one. I drew the curtains and stood for a while, utterly at a loss. With scant conviction, fear kept repeating that it was only a trick of vision—it could be nothing else. But the cold sweat broke on my forehead.

For I could have sworn that what I saw under a brim of dark felt were the masterful eyes and intent face of Francis Ballion.

Chapter Ten

ON MY OWN RESPONSIBILITY

I did not report this incident to Norse when I called him up by 'phone next morning. The more I thought about it, the more preposterous it seemed, and I did not care to be treated to sarcasm. I believed that what I had seen was actual—or at least, for the sake of sanity, I wished to believe it—but, lacking proof, I might just as well avoid being laughed at. On the other hand, I was very much interested to know if anything had been heard of my would-be assassin of yesterday who had filed the steering gear.

Norse's reply to this was a blank. No trace had been found, high or low. It was hardly to be expected, he added; and went on with great emphasis to repeat the advice of Roose, that I should leave town for a while.

"There's no reason why you shouldn't," he urged. "One of your colleagues could take over your practice and the case at Greyhouse as well. If you were physically done up, you'd have to get away, and this is more serious still. It's very serious. I can't give you much protection. You're doing no good to yourself or any one else by staying. And anyhow, I think an absence of two weeks would be enough."

"Oh, you do?"

"Yes," came his voice, "but don't joke about it."

"I'm not," I answered, "but I think you are. Why should a perfectly innocent person who is simply interested in his work be driven out of town for no conceivable motive?"

"That's an academic question where you're entirely in the right; but it's not worth dying for. The point is, somebody wants to kill you, and I'm not sure I can prevent it."

"Have you no suspicions as to who that person is?"

"I have. I connect your accident yesterday with the Ballion crime; in fact, I warned you that something might happen."

"Then I think you ought to make an arrest."

Norse's voice sharpened. "Thanks. I've told you *ad nauseam* that I have no proof and only suppositions to go on. Don't let's discuss that again. I've told you I'm not at liberty to mention what person or persons I suspect. I've

hinted that you're *persona non grata* at Greyhouse. I've done and will do all I can for you. But if you decide to remain in town it's on your own responsibility. Won't you go?"

"I will not," I answered stubbornly.

"If you'll pardon the intrusion," he retorted, "I think there's something that interests you at Greyhouse besides your work; and if I were you I'd shun that pitfall as I would the devil."

At this point I was glad we were not facing each other, and changed the subject. "By the way, Norse, are you sure that Francis Ballion is actually dead?"

"Absolutely. Why do you ask?"

"No reason. I only wanted to know."

And there the matter rested.

I took, however, what precautions I could. Having purchased a new car, I engaged as chauffeur one of Norse's protégés who could do something more than drive; the foreman at the garage was given instructions, and there was no longer any question of parking outside. In addition to preventing any repeated interference with the car, which was hardly likely, this arrangement with the chauffeur had the supreme value, in Norse's opinion, of giving me a companion on the road from town to Greyhouse. Evidently he feared that another blow of a different nature might be struck along the lonely stretch of highway.

But the days passed. Nothing happened, nor indeed did I hear anything further as to Norse's activities. With surprising promptness, the case of Francis Ballion began to fade from mind. As a matter of fact, from now on I was distracted increasingly by two levels of thought: the one represented by Greyhouse, which became rapidly predominant, and the older but now receding mentality. My life underwent a sharp deflection, and it was perhaps not so strange after all that what had absorbed me before the beginning of this process should appear of less significance.

I have said that days passed. To be more accurate, I am conscious in memory of a vague passage of time, which seemed much longer than it actually was. I lived *further* at that period than ever before. The mind was led, as it were, through an endless suite of rooms, not confined as it usually is to one, but going on and on; and the clock which may have reckoned out the hours of a fortnight bore no relation to the extent traversed. Looking back I think of that experience in terms of years.

To define shortly, if I may, the effect of whatever modality of thought it was which seemed operative and intent at Greyhouse, I should say that it brought about a heightening of every mental and sensual power with a corresponding atrophy of the moral faculties. Let me explain this concretely.

At the office or hospital, I never worked so intensely or accomplished more. I freed myself from traditional methods and theories. I took fact as my lodestar and gave it significance by my own deductions. There grew a sense of emancipation and widened vision. They were the days, however much I have reason to be ashamed of them otherwise, when I made my greatest advance professionally.

But side by side with this went an equal insensibility to moral scruples. I played with life as if it were merely a chemical substance. I performed useless if interesting operations and experiments, took risks that were utterly unauthorized, and but for good luck might have become involved in the grossest scandal. Human pain impressed me only as a nervous reaction, the art of healing as no more than the exercise of technique. There was that case, for instance, of a brain operation which was wholly unnecessary and almost certain to be fatal, but which I insisted on for the fascination of it and put through successfully. I tremble now to think of the danger.

Not only, however, in this direction did the new influence make itself felt. My thought, as it were, put out new branches. I felt myself attracted toward every form of art, hungry with interest toward each phase of human ingenuity. It was a joy to act and think; it was a joy to use all the senses. But there was this limitation, that what interested me applied only to form, grace, subtlety, rather than to spiritual content. As I look over several articles written at that time, I am impressed by a brilliancy of expression I never had afterward; but their cynical background is equally evident.

Now, that I stayed on at Greyhouse, in spite of Norse's warning, and took so much trouble and made so much to-do about the case of Anne Roderick, will certainly appear exactly what it was—a mere subterfuge. After the first three or four days there was no doubt that she could be moved without any risk at all. And Eleanor knew this as well as I did. But by tacit consent we clung to the pretext. It suited her to stay on there, and Anne Roderick was her sole justification. It goes without saying that it equally suited me. Between the two of us we kept up what seemed a harmless hypocrisy. As to Anne herself, who retained a dread of the house and wondered from day to day when she and Eleanor might leave, it was easy enough to cajole ourselves with the belief that we acted in her best interests. It was all pretense, together with the excuse of mine that my presence at

night gave Eleanor a sense of security. She had no longer any fear at Greyhouse; indeed, I used to wonder how genuine her uneasiness had ever been.

No, the truth is that the place exerted a strong attraction on both of us, and that besides I was drawn there by my passion for Eleanor.

I was drawn all the more perhaps by the growing hopelessness of it, like the proverbial moth to the flame. Never again did she permit a repetition of the first evening. Never again was I allowed to flatter myself that she took my advances seriously. It amused her, I think, to have me there, to watch me burn, to patronize me before Carl Ballion. It was instinctive repayment, no doubt, for my credulous chivalry. Now it was she who was arbitress, she who was strong and kept me dangling before the fire that I had once resisted. If it amused her, it amused Carl Ballion still more. And I had neither pride nor spirit enough to spoil the game by staying away. I could not. It was something to watch her beauty, which seemed to develop from day to day into greater arrogance and luxuriousness; to enjoy, with the fever of thirst, her infinite charm of expression or movement. These were crumbs to my famine, and I could not do without them; but they were dearly purchased.

Not that she or Ballion were openly rude or behaved in such a way as to make resentment inevitable. I believe that my own cankered envy saw numerous slights that were none. But the line they took was that of intimates toward a hanger-on who is treated with indulgence. Besides, it is pleasant to have a listener, a handy third in conversation, particularly when conventions demand his presence; and I did as well as another.

I am not sure that this is the correct analysis; but I am sure that Ballion, whatever he may have thought at first, no longer considered me a rival. His superiority was too evident, and I admitted soon enough that he had something to offer that eclipsed anything of mine. She would be mistress of Greyhouse if she married him. They discussed it openly: the parties they would give, rearrangement of decoration, further development of the grounds. He urged her to announce their engagement, and I could see that her repugnance was wearing thin. At length she consented to do so at the beginning of the next month.

“And our wedding?” asked Carl.

“In May,” she answered with decision, her eyes full on him.

Mentally I was shocked. I could have waxed eloquent about funeral baked meats and marriage tables. I understood how such a thing coarsened and compromised her. But I had traveled too far along the same path myself to *feel* anything more than bafflement and envy thrice doubled. It was then for the first time that thought whispered a remedy which, though put off, kept recurring. It was that the marriage would never happen, if Carl Ballion died.

"You don't congratulate us," I heard him say; and plucking up a smile from somewhere, I managed to respond that congratulations were too deep for words.

"The doctor looks pensive," he laughed. "But we'll invite him out for week-ends in the summer. And perhaps he'll have learned enough to drive his car alone by then. What, Ames?"

"Perhaps," I agreed.

Our evenings were spent in various ways, often in conversation, though frequently Eleanor would play and sing for us. She had a clear, rich voice, and as music intertwines itself with memory, the songs of that time haunt me even now, and have the power to evoke old scenes and the spirit of them. Occasionally also, unable to bear any longer the sight of her with Ballion, I retired to torment myself over a book, or would go upstairs for a talk with Anne Roderick.

This friendly, loyal woman affected me in a way curiously refreshing. She had not been drawn into what might be termed the current of Greyhouse, but set herself against it and voiced an antipathy very similar to what I had felt once. According to her, it was a big, gilded place, very fine to look at, and about as cheerful as a tomb. She could not forget "Miss Celia," and the life she had led here and how she had died. She could not understand why "other people" had forgotten. The place frightened her, particularly when the wind sounded, as it had "that night." She was not uneducated, and of a simple, honest mind that betrayed the country stock she came from. We had one great subject in common, namely, Eleanor, whom she thought of only as she had been. With her, I seemed to come closer to Eleanor, and could feel I had something that Carl Ballion would never possess. It was as if I met her all over again, not the vivid, compelling beauty of to-day, but one more sensitive and immaculate. And there would recur, as a faint after-glow, our earlier acquaintance, with its stirring of a different love.

It should be noted that Francis Ballion's library at this time was no longer closed. Although the locks of the doors had been repaired, the latter

stood open, and it was here that Eleanor, Carl, and I spent the better part of several evenings. Here also I used to withdraw occasionally to read. It was a most interesting place. In spite of my feelings toward Carl Ballion, which included everything about him in a comprehensive dislike, I must confess that his anecdotes relative to various items of his brother's collection were fascinating; and these led on to other anecdotes of history, in which he seemed very well informed. That standard carried by John de' Medici of the Black Bands, that helmet worn by Cesare Borgia, that bracelet which had belonged to Caterina Sforza. He had the faculty of making events live, and though he always quoted his brother as his authority for facts, he had a peculiarly artistic talent for narrative.

I find that my memory of those days, in a confusion to which I have alluded, has a tendency to break up into episodes without sequence, like detached sparks. Several of them are significant.

One evening in the library Eleanor grew curious about the torture instruments, and asked Carl for a description. There was nothing odd about this, for the things with their grim past were interesting. What was, however, startling and indeed terrible, was the evident relish they both took in the recital. Carl was at his best, vivid and coldly humorous. I can still see her in black evening dress near him, her cheeks flushed, her eyes absorbed; and she laughed again and again. He described the caricature effect of pillory and wheel, the antics of a stout rogue beneath the lash, the grimaces of some one before a slow fire. She was highly amused.

"But Eleanor, figure to yourself a man impaled, like a monkey on a hook, up in the air—arms and legs jerking."

"Grotesque," she answered. "I'd like to have seen one."

"Of course you would," laughed Carl; "you're not a sentimentalist. We're wasted, my Eleanor, on humanitarian days."

It happened that her glance crossed with mine, and for a moment I saw a vague horror in it that flamed and went out. And she laughed again.

On another occasion, Ballion, who had heard about some cases of mine at the hospital, complimented me in a back-handed fashion: "The doctor's becoming famous," he smiled; "he's literally cutting his way to greatness."

Eleanor's look, I thought, showed warmer approval with regard to me than for some time.

"I like fame," she asserted, "laurel and gloria. If I didn't know you cared more about it than for anything else, Carl, I'd take another man."

“Richard, perhaps?” he challenged.

“Why not?”

It was about this time that I had one of my talks with Anne Roderick. I had found her pale and depressed, with some return of more serious symptoms. She confessed, after a while, that Eleanor had just told her of the approaching announcement. There was an evident struggle between loyalty and dismay.

“I don’t understand,” she kept repeating, “I can’t believe it. *His* brother —and now—this soon! It can’t be—tell me, sir, that it isn’t true!”

I had no comfort to give, and she went on in a low voice, as if to herself, “I suppose Mr. Ballion’s a good man, but it’s the same blood, the same strange blood. I’ve never been able to like him, handsome as he is. I’m afraid he’ll be cruel to her. His lips—it shows there. And she loves him. I thought this summer it was you she cared for, the way she spoke of you. Now she’ll go on living here after the wedding, and that means we can’t be together. I don’t want to live in Greyhouse.” She broke off, and more timidly: “I suppose it’s lying in bed that gives me queer notions. I’ve the feeling it isn’t Miss Eleanor at all—she’s that changed, even to look at her. She’s gotten so worldly and unkind. I thought she was going to strike me when I spoke against her marriage. Please take us both away, sir, before it’s too late.”

I answered that it would be soon now, and inwardly cursed the infatuation which bound me there.

She dropped the subject, and instead asked me a sudden question: “Tell me, sir, do you really think that Francis Ballion died?”

And as Norse had answered, but without the latter’s assurance, I told her it was certain.

“So every one says,” she demurred, “and yet it’s hard to believe that as strong a man as that could really die. Sometimes I have the feeling of him as if he were in the house—waiting. As if. . . Please,” she cried, “let me go away.”

And again I answered that it would be soon.

At dinner shortly afterward, Eleanor said to Carl Ballion that Anne disapproved of him.

“She does, eh?” he returned. “Well, poor girl, I don’t blame her. She’s Celia’s faithful dog. But,” he added, smiling, “she must learn new tricks.”

What I recall, however, most distinctly at that period is not so much separate scenes and conversations as one emotion, which informed and stained everything else. It was my bitter hatred for Carl Ballion. And there was no use calling it unreasonable, or admitting that he had done nothing except prove himself a better man in Eleanor’s eyes. That had been possible once, but in the present temper of life, passion was like a coin—on one side love, and failing that, hate. His image haunted me like a mania. Even in town, but particularly at Greyhouse, I could not be rid of the desire to try conclusions with him somehow. The sense of my inferiority maddened me, and more often, more firmly, the thought insinuated itself that a possible and facile remedy was at hand if I cared to use it, and that no one was better situated to use it than I. At all events, there was a certain outlet in considering the matter and playing theoretically with the idea. I had access to every possible drug, but there was also a question as to whether bacteria might not prove more expedient. My reputation placed me above suspicion, and I was known, moreover, as a friend of Ballion’s. Besides, he not infrequently asked me to prescribe for some trifling ailment, and I therefore had every facility.

Not that I meant to do such a thing. It was as if subconsciousness worked out a plan and presented it, then, being refused, elaborated another. It was the rising of poison bubbles to the surface, an obscure fermentation that grew steadily more intense, harder to control, even pleasant to entertain. Once, in a flash of self-revelation, I found myself contrasting this state of mind with my attitude of not two weeks ago. It seemed years off, as when two photographs of the same man are compared, one taken in youth, the second in age. But this impression was short-lived; it faded into acquiescence.

What stung me particularly with regard to Ballion was neither what he did nor said, but his manner of amused condescension. He had the trick of watching me as if prying into my thoughts to make game of them, or searching for the hidden strings that would make me jerk as he pleased. It was a sort of probing irony, a subtle bullying of my personality by his. And in this he was perfectly successful. I felt myself shrink from his glance, grew confused when I talked with him, and showed myself in a most helpless light. He turned me here and there, so to speak, suavely exhibiting this curious specimen to Eleanor and himself. What his motives were, I am

unable to conceive. Probably he found me susceptible, and I imagine he was actually interested in exploring the recesses of what seemed to him an inferior mind, just as he would be absorbed in any other problem. Besides, it required a fine touch to play the fiddle without making it squeak, to screw it up without snapping a cord—in other words, to humiliate me and at the same time leave no rejoinder possible.

But it was a dangerous game, given the circumstances, given the surcharged atmosphere we breathed. And the mental ferment persisted, and the cords of the human fiddle wore thin.

It reached a point where he seemed to have made my thought his book, turning the leaves of it, chuckling over a passage here, or calling Eleanor's attention to another. One evening he remarked with a smile: "I wonder what girl Ames will marry; because I think he'd like to marry if he could. But of course that's a delicate question. On the other hand, it's entirely proper to ask what your ideal is, Richard—what is it, now?"

I flushed and stammered, and brought out with a sort of stupid dignity that I wasn't prepared to say.

"Oh, well, then," he went on, "let me tell you. I'll paint the portrait of the future Mrs. Ames to a *t*. You'll like it, I'm sure. For one, she'll incline to the blonde and delicate, and will be perfectly educated—refined, modest, serious, a favorite with the parson. Oh, I see Mrs. Ames so clearly, Doctor! Simply gowned—your slippers warmed for you at evening. Above all, she'll be eminently proper. She wouldn't allow a friend of yours to hold her hand before the fire, and you away. She would not permit—I blush, to think of it, I really will *not* think of it—but in short, she would never encourage the poor devil in idiotic hopes, torment him—flirt, in other words. Never!"

It seemed to me that the floor was rising under me. I saw Eleanor suppress a smile. Passion choked me. Had they been laughing at my expense over her maneuver of the other evening? Was that one of their secret jokes? But what answer had I in either case, if she had told him or not? Coolness, it might be suggested; sarcasm to sarcasm. But I was past that; his fiddle-bow cut into the raw. I sprang up.

"What talk is this!" I said; "What do you mean by concerning yourself with my affairs!" and stood speechless and convulsed, at grope for words.

He looked utterly amazed, removed his pipe from his lips, and stared at me.

“Good heavens, man,” he returned, “what’s wrong? I beg humble pardon for insulting you—but I’d never have expected such rage at praising the virtue of your wife. It’s our degenerate times, Eleanor; they’re really frightful. But, dear fellow, now that I know your feelings, I prophesy you’ll marry a second Messalina. Don’t sulk!”

And spurned by his hard, bold eyes, fancy became purpose. I resolved to kill him, and, knowing that, I joined Eleanor in her laugh, and felt at ease and a match for him.

“Why, dear fellow,” I answered, “your interest in my future wife almost equals mine in yours. It’s an exchange of thoughtfulness. And it’s good we both agree that the times are degenerate.”

For once, something crept into his eyes that I had not seen; for once a vein showed across his forehead, and for once he made no answer, but nodding slightly looked away.

After a time I left them and went into the library with the intention of reading. Outwardly I was cool, but actually on fire. I suppose the damned may burn in such invisible flames, but with this difference, that relief through action is denied them, whereas for me there were plans I could make, and a deed to be accomplished. After that, I was careless about what happened; until then I should have no relief.

On the whole it was probable that Eleanor had said nothing to Carl about our affair of the other evening. From the most perverse standpoint, I could not imagine why she should. No doubt he had hit by chance on the exposed nerve. But even if she had, I could feel toward her only half-hearted anger. I might repeat that I hated her, that she had stooped to low trickery for the sake of a foolish triumph; but I knew that at the first glance, the first smile, all this would be canceled. Indeed, even cruelty and deceit harmonized with her new self, the changed aspect of our life, and my own mood. I admired her for something independent of ethics just as, for instance, I could admire this poniard, which I unhooked from its place, for the supple steel of its blade and the jeweled hilt.

At any rate, I reflected, balancing the weapon in my hand, she would never have the satisfaction of smiling over me with him in the years to come, nor he of ranging her with his other prizes. How exquisite this dagger was—a jewel in itself! I wondered idly whether she would inherit Greyhouse at his death. She would certainly purchase it in any case. And then, if I had managed skilfully, perhaps. . .

That was the point of the thing—by no precipitancy, by no slip of tongue or temper to give rise to the remotest question. His death would be natural enough. In other days, bravoes could have been hired to do the trick. Now the names of still more competent bravoes presented themselves, each with a special recommendation: bacterium mallei, lepræ—bacillus tetani, anthracis. Better still perhaps was tetanus toxin, the poison developed by the infection. I remembered that three ten thousandths of a grain was fatal. It was singular how easily the mind worked, selecting, rejecting.

I paced slowly up and down the room, now and then stopping to look at some curio, but actually not seeing it. There appeared, instead, ways and means. In this state of mind I found myself standing at last above the carved face of the Medusa before the narrow door and absently staring at it. Perhaps some vague memory of Norse's interest in this particular stone recurred, but my real thought was on other things, when, looking up, I saw that Carl Ballion had entered and was standing close to me.

Hands in his pockets, his eyes read mine curiously and intently, but his face showed no other emotion; whereas, confronted thus without warning by the object of my thoughts, I must have looked confused. At any rate, I started back a pace and muttered that I had not heard him.

"Interesting stone," he observed. "It seems to distract your attention from reading."

"Why, yes," I answered, and for lack of anything better, "Ten days ago, Norse was particularly impressed by it."

"Ah, he was? Well, I've often wondered myself at Francis's superstition in setting that thing at the threshold of his Door of Death. It's a bad place for us to be standing, isn't it? But then we're not superstitious."

Chapter Eleven

THE LETTER

What is superstition? In a vague way, I suppose, we could define it as an improbable theory about cause and effect. On the other hand, what is coincidence? I don't know, nor does any one. They are two convenient, indispensable words, but indefinite. Was it coincidence, for example, the following afternoon when I was about to leave for Greyhouse, that a call was put through from Norse asking me to his office? And is it superstition that I believe in a directing Providence which inspired that call?

I had spent the day in a turmoil between old and new, between two selves. All that remained of conscience stood out, a shaken barrier, to meet the storm of alien purposes and passions, which were, however, also mine. I like to believe that decency and ideals would have survived the test. Indeed, I do believe it. Drawn, as it were, by some mesmeric influence, I had labored that day to prepare a culture of infinitesimal size, which if consumed in food, for instance, would do its work in forty-eight hours, and diagnosis would leave no one the wiser. But then, though weak with the strain of will against desire, I had destroyed the poison, horrified at the moral deprivation it implied, though still at grips with temptation and as yet uncertain of self-mastery. At least, I had not yielded. I might have done so under renewed pressure of that influence which had beset me during the past two weeks; or I might still have found strength to resist it. But at that juncture Norse's call arrived, whether providential or not must be determined by individual opinion. In view of what happened later, my decision one way or another would have made, of course, no practical difference; but at all events my conscience is free of prepared and intended crime.

I would have preferred to make an excuse to Norse, but there was no good one available; besides, he might have something to tell me which affected my own plans; so, grumbling mentally, I had myself driven over to the municipal building where he lived. I hoped he would not take long.

Norse sat at his desk scribbling when I entered, and only looked up to nod.

"How are your Renaissance studies?" I asked; but he shook his head like one who does not care to be interrupted, and went on writing for some time. Then gathering the sheets of paper together he rang for a stenographer,

handed them over with the remark: “Type ‘Very confidential,’ ” and turning to me at last, raised the green visor that shielded his eyes.

“Good Lord, man,” he exclaimed, “what’s happened to you?”

“Nothing at all,” I answered. “Why?”

“You look positively ill—you look like a ghost. As a matter of fact,” he went on, “I rather expected you would be literally a ghost by now. But your judgment seems to have been better than mine. No further ‘accidents’ have occurred, I suppose?”

“No,” I said, wondering why he stared at me.

“So much the better, then.” And dismissing the topic: “You asked about my Renaissance studies. They’re progressing slowly. It isn’t as if I had your facilities in living at Greyhouse.” And once more his glance quickened. “But I’ll probably have to continue them in private life. I’ve just been writing out my final reports. It looks as if I’m to be superseded.”

“How so?”

“Why, cashiered—dismissed,” he smiled. “It appears to have been noised about in higher quarters that I made a mess of the Ballion case by not taking ordinary precautions. Pressure was brought to bear on the commissioner, and when he taxed me with it I could only admit the fact. So with great regret, expressions of esteem and so on, I was requested to resign. I’m through in two weeks.”

I asked if any one had been particularly active against him; but he said no, it was the press on one hand and critics in the force who would have liked his position.

“But,” he remarked, “I’m not gone yet.” And with this indefinite statement he waved the matter aside, observing that he hadn’t called me in to discuss personal affairs. “I had the idea that you considered me unduly reticent with regard to what affected our mutual experience, and I only wanted to show you that wherever possible I welcomed your advice. Here is a case in point. And if you can spare me a moment, I’ll ask you to admire this.”

Suiting the action to the word, he drew from his desk a small box, which he opened and handed to me.

It contained a large ring richly encrusted with gems. The stones were an interweaving of emeralds supporting a magnificent ruby of considerable value, I imagined, and superb as an ornament.

“To be worn on the thumb,” said Norse, “a man’s thumb, as was the practice at one time. What adds to its interest, however, is that it belonged to Francis Ballion’s collection.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why, just that. I traced the former sale of it to him. And I had my eyes open for possible reappearance on the market of some of his jewels. In fact, with a good deal of trouble I have put together an imperfect list of the gems he possessed, but this is the only one that has come to my attention.”

“But—” I began.

“That’s the point,” he interrupted. “It has been sold *since* Francis Ballion’s death.”

“Carl may have disposed of it,” I objected.

“Quite so, but if he did, it was illegal, because the property is as yet in the hands of trustees. Moreover, one of them told me confidentially that the gem collection had not been found. There seems to be a good deal of difficulty, by the way, in settling this estate, because of Ballion’s debts to the Graham property. Now, if Carl sold this, he knows the whereabouts of the collection and is withholding it from the trustees. If, on the other hand, we suppose the ring to have been given him by his brother, I see no need of all the secrecy used in selling it. The purchaser was a rich, if obscure, Jew merchant, who doubtless made a good bargain. He told me that the vendor was a man in a black felt hat pulled over his eyes and with his coat collar turned up. The payment was in cash. When I roasted him for doing business in that way, he shuffled and evaded, and nothing was to be got out of him. But assuming that it was Carl, which we have no right to do, and that the ring had come properly into his possession, why should he go to that trouble?”

“Do you know anything of his financial status?” I asked, and there was more than this immediate interest which prompted the question.

“I do not,” returned Norse, “except that he earns and spends largely. He’s no less prodigal than was Francis. There’s nothing small about Carl Ballion.”

Praise of him was like a hot coal. I turned to another feature of the ring transaction: “You mentioned a black felt hat.”

“Yes, and I know what you are thinking of.”

"I don't believe you do," I answered, "but if you'll promise not to laugh I'll tell you." And with that, deeming the occasion apt, I gave him an account of what I had seen at Anne Roderick's window.

He remained serious enough, but in the end expressed the sort of comment I had expected. "Greyhouse is an odd place, and I said that you were looking ill. My advice still holds that it would be good for you to leave town for a while." And interrupting my retort, "But I'll say this in favor of what I imagine you believe, that it's a queer thing for a man with the resourcefulness of Francis Ballion to commit suicide by blowing off his head with a shot-gun."

"Then you doubt. . ."

"Particularly a man," he interrupted me by adding, "who was innocent of the crime he was charged with."

I laughed. "Do you stick to that? First impressions are always the most indelible, aren't they?"

"Yes," he returned. "And now tell me what you think of this."

It was a short letter to Norse in a feminine hand, which read as follows:

> In view of published accounts regarding the late Francis Ballion, it may interest you to know that he could not have committed his alleged crime, for the reason that he was with me on the night of October 31 from eight o'clock until about half-past four the next morning. This is the entire truth. Why he should have left a false confession of guilt I am unable to imagine. That he refused to disclose his whereabouts was clearly on account of scruples toward me and his wife. My regard for Mr. Ballion's reputation and my hope that whoever is actually guilty may be discovered have prompted this letter, which I hope will carry conviction, even though the same reasons actuating Mr. Ballion's silence make it necessary to withhold my name.

"Anonymous," I commented, handing the paper back to Norse. "It's interesting, naturally, but I don't know how much weight should be attached to it. There are always mystifiers or sentimental women who follow such a case."

He nodded. "But the point is that it's no longer anonymous. I showed you a photograph some days ago which I found in Ballion's desk on the night of my visit, and which seemed to you vaguely familiar. It wasn't

difficult to discover the original, and if you're still ignorant, I'll say merely that it's the wife of one of our leading actors."

At that, I recalled and mentioned the name of a woman who had been pointed out to me at the theater several months before, and whom we will call Mrs. Starnforth.

"Exactly," said Norse, "though you will consider it confidential. Upon receiving this letter, I put two and two together and went to call on Mrs. Starnforth. When I handed her the photograph, it needed no ability in reading faces to know that she was the authoress of the letter."

"And she admitted it?"

"Yes, in the end. It seems that she is being divorced, and has reached the point of not caring much. I believe she was deeply in love with Francis Ballion, and on my word would have made him a more suitable wife than Celia, with her temperament, her ardor, and joy of life. I quite understood the mutual attraction, because, after all, they belonged to those who are outside the law. Well, what do you think now?"

But my mind was too confused for any opinion. "It looks," I muttered, "as if you had been right all along."

As he resumed his place by the desk, I could see no evidence of particular satisfaction. He seemed, if anything, to have become more dispassionate.

"She may be lying," he observed.

"I don't believe it."

"Neither do I, but still it's a contingency that has to be considered. Supposing she is, it would tend to show that Francis Ballion is not dead; that having committed the crime and unable to furnish an alibi, he went into hiding somewhere, and prevailed on this woman to come forward with her story, which if accepted would enable him to reappear at the proper time. This version explains what you think you saw at the window as well as the sale of the ring; but it explains absolutely nothing else, and unless Mrs. Starnforth is romancing for the fun of it, or having an affection for Ballion desires to clear his name in this quixotic way, I think we can put that assumption on one side as beyond credence. Still, preposterous things happen and their possibility has to be borne in mind.

"But now admitting that she tells the truth, we are still at a loss with regard to Ballion's statement—because why confess to a crime he did not

commit? I don't believe chivalry would go that far. We are also at a loss about the reason of his suicide, the sale of the ring, and the tampering with your car. For the rest, of course, her testimony strengthens my own earlier inferences. The thing's a tangle. But you see it's got to be untangled."

"But if he didn't kill Celia Ballion, who did?" I insisted.

And here Norse closed up like a clam. "You have the various possibilities," he returned, "Hasta, Miss Graham, an unknown—do your suspecting for yourself."

Hatred for one who had been left out of this list boiled into words. "You never mention Carl Ballion," I exclaimed.

Norse looked at me steadily. "I don't, and you know why: his presence at the Press Club Banquet that night where he made a speech—above all, lack of any motive in killing Mrs. Ballion. But a third thing: you realize how utterly unjust it would be to start unfounded gossip about Carl on the eve of an election. He's already seriously handicapped on account of his connection with Francis, and his entire career depends upon his being kept out of scandal. I'm not the one to start it without good cause, particularly in view of his brother's confession; and certainly you are not. We're both friends of Carl, aren't we?"

I found it hard to speak, because after all consistent hypocrisy is an art which takes practice to master. Ill at ease and with the sense of changing color, I brought out at last, "Why, certainly."

There was a brief pause in which I felt without meeting it Norse's glance. "I hope," he said slowly, "that he realizes how good a friend you are. Be sure he realizes it." Then, taking out his watch, "It's too late for your dinner at Greyhouse. I'm sorry. Better dine with me, and you can run out afterward."

There was nothing to do but accept, and moreover Norse's clean-cut personality had somehow a tonic influence. I felt relief at missing that particular dinner with Carl, and for once there was some diminishment in the obsession that drew me back to Greyhouse.

I even stayed on a while after supper in conversation. We talked of Mrs. Starnforth and Francis Ballion. We understood now with sympathy why he had kept silent. And my first impression of him, gained from his portrait, became once more distinct—a strong, fearless personality, but also, under the terms of an older code, a gentleman. We were absorbed, however, principally by the fact that once more the hunt was on, the mystery of

Celia's death unsolved, and I felt a breath of dread as to where the scent might lead. Norse had proved himself no blunderer after all; I was conscious of an uneasy certainty that when he struck at last the blow would not fail. What if one of his targets should be Eleanor!

Meanwhile, throughout, I was aware of the detective's scrutiny, as if he were attempting to decide from my face whether or not he should tell me of something which he considered important. But he said nothing.

And in this, as things turned out, he made a mistake which had nearly a fatal outcome.

Chapter Twelve

"THEY OPENED A DOOR"

Rain had set in steadily as I drove back that night to Greyhouse—steel-like splinters pecking at the windshield. It was a minute rain, neither violent nor gentle, which gave promise of holding on, a cold November sleet. The chauffeur predicted a siege of it, as he nosed our car along the black, winding road. Our headlights gave an effect of striking bluntly against a wall two yards in front and falling dead. What sailors call "thick weather."

"If any one has it in for you," remarked the chauffeur, "here's his chance. We can't make speed. Easy to stretch a cable across the road—we wouldn't see it; or to swing up on the running board. But he'd get his belly full," and following a jerk of the thumb, I saw a naked revolver on his knees. "Still, you'd better keep your eyes open," he added.

I followed his advice. What a strange fatality, I thought, hung over every person and thing connected with Greyhouse! It was as if surrounded by invisible outworks; once past them you entered a zone of fear, passion, mortality. And I remembered having this sensation from the first. Normal life underwent a sort of obscuration, as if only certain rays of thought penetrated there. But they were vivid rays. I recalled a sentence of André Gide's to the effect that a life has value only in so far as it has burned more ardently than other lives; and it was this ardor of life, as distinct from the common round, that drew and held me to Greyhouse with a growing thirst. There I had learned the joy, bitter or sweet, of intense emotion. It had become a craving as for some forbidden drug. What mattered the change wrought in me, surrender of ideals, the attraction even of crime; what mattered it that in proportion to its heat is the duration of the flame, and that life burned itself out quickly? In the blast of desire, whether of hate or love, scruples are dead leaves—only its fulfilment matters; and if conscience has not kept the spark from the powder, it goes up in the explosion.

These and similar thoughts, incisive as the rain, pelted at my mind during that drive. Moreover, there remained constant the uncertainty, with its vague implication, which had resulted from the afternoon's discovery. It was to a place still haunted by unsolved crime that I was returning; and over three persons whom I saw daily, with whom I associated, there hung a like suspicion. To the equivocal shadow attending this group I was now adding my own, hardly less equivocal. A fine company, I thought, in that wide hall

of Greyhouse, four of us breathing the same poisoned air. But what did it matter any longer? I would not exchange that world and its fever for the tame come-and-go of other life, even because the wine there was of fire.

And of a sudden our headlights shone on the granite pillars of the gateway. We had made the drive without incident.

"I'm beginning to think," said the chauffeur in a tone of disappointment, "that whoever was after you once has given up the job, because this was surely his king chance."

A moment later we drew up before the lighted entrance, and on foot by the steaming radiator I gave some directions for next day. "Good night," I called, as the car backed for a turn. I little knew what experiences were destined to occur before morning; but the scene, as unimportant things will, stamped a vivid impression on my mind—the haze of rain, the car with its streaming headlights, the sense of the great carved doorway at which I stood. It was as if an obscure prophetic sense marked a conclusion here and the beginning of another phase.

Although it was after ten, I expected to find Eleanor and Carl about; but when Hasta opened for me I saw that the lights were partially off and the hall empty. "Mr. Ballion went back early to-night," said the butler, "and Miss Graham has retired. She left a bite of supper for you and this note, sir."

He handed me a card of writing and pointed to a small table in front of the hearth, where some logs were smoldering.

"Very thoughtful of her," I answered, and glanced at the card, which read: "We were both sorry you missed dinner—at least with us. Carl suggested you might be hungry, and I'm leaving sandwiches for you made with my own fair hands." Reading, I pictured her hands, shapely and strong; their image recalled the evening we had sat together before the fire. "Carl contributed a glass of his Barbera. I'm tired and am going to bed early. Good night."

I was not hungry, but politeness demanded that I take something. Besides, as I looked down at the neat array on the little table, the thought recurred of her hands and the night when for once I had pressed them to my lips. Their touch, I fancied, still clung to this bread, just as for me her presence lingered in the hall. It would be good for a time to sit before the fire dreaming of her, building the future around her, warmed more by the thought of her than by the glowing hearth. There also stood a glass of crimson-black wine. He had left it for me, had he—he who smiled and

patronized, holding me up before her in his serene ridicule! The day's temptations recurred with a new force. I would dream of him as well, and sip his wine. Which was more potent a cordial, the thought of her or of him? And meanwhile over me would lean the dynamic, brooding spirit of the house.

"Have you need of anything, Doctor?" inquired Hasta.

"Oh, no—of nothing," I said, already installing myself in the great chair.

I heard his good night and murmured a reply. The glass of wine fascinated me. If he sat here now, how easy in the half-light to let a certain atom fall in his glass beside mine. . .

I fancied myself with her when May had come, perhaps in the gardens outside, which would be in blossom. Even in their winter desolation it was not difficult to imagine their springtime beauty—the shaded walks, the spice of early roses. We would speak of Carl Ballion, his brilliance and promise, his ease and zest in living. I could well afford to praise him, because I lived. And it was the month of roses, the month of fecundity, when earth stretches her arms out to the sun. Exhalations of the ground, sweeter, more languid here than elsewhere, I divined, would cling to the garden. And remembering him, she would remember chiefly herself—desire unsatisfied, the call of earth and air, the compelling spirit of this place. How appropriate, I smiled to myself, looking at the embers through the wine, if in May she and I, together at Greyhouse. . .

It had, indeed, an imperial color, this vintage, a color in itself symbolic of life at its quintessential, the crimson of passion deepening into black, held in this compass of frail crystal. I drank, and even the sweet bitterness of taste seemed eloquent of experience. My thought sardonically pledged Eleanor in Ballion's wine. That I drank it appeared to me also symbolic and of good omen.

Not being thirsty, I set the glass aside half-finished, and having tasted a sandwich and lighted a cigarette, I remained luxuriously relaxed, my eyes on the fire.

What a glorious thing life was, after all, if one only chose to live; and that meant insisting on yourself, getting rid of intangible baggage which, like baptismal vows, had been thrust on you at birth, getting rid of what had been drummed into your ears and was repeated by every one until it became a code of ethics. It meant disregarding this modern bugbear called society, except as the latter could be made useful to you. This actually; though of

course in appearance one flattered the tyrant with lip service and kept it affable. Our obligations to society! The individual merged in society! Idea of a beehive, an ant-heap. What balderdash! One of the charms of Greyhouse was that here these formulas were reversed: one thirsted and drank, if not from one's own cup, then—and I smiled—from that of another. One desired and took, for there were neither fair means nor foul—there were only means. Responsibility ended with the gratification of each faculty, the fulfilment of each desire at any cost save to oneself. It was the law of nature; it was the upward thrust to the air and sun; it was life.

Strange how clear it all seemed to-night, with what eagerness I looked forward to the years, what peace crept over me. From outside could be heard the distant stirring of the rain, but within was a vast silence.

I found that I could put my thoughts and plans before me, as it were detaching them from myself, looking at them, enjoying the idea of their fruition, without sharing their unrest. A pity only that so much of life had been wasted until now! I looked back at the past as antiquated lumber, covered with cobwebs. It seemed better to count my years until forty; there were six of them, and afterward six more—twelve years of undiminished power, things to be accomplished, pleasure to be tasted—twelve years of burning before the flame drooped. Or why set the limit so close—perhaps twenty, thirty years. In expanding fancy I saw them spent at Greyhouse—in part. I devised Paradise for Eleanor and myself. I saw her stand before me, growing ever into something more brilliant, more tempting, even more cruel and more beautiful. Sometimes we would laugh together about a night when Carl Ballion, who thought to have her and her wealth, drained a glass with a certain flake of death in it—and no one knew except she and I. What did she care, what did she care, with that beauty of hers, who lived or died? He had striven for her, he had lost, I had gained. That was the story. I could afford to praise him, his talent, his spirit. And as she stood before me, radiant in a vague dream-light, I pitied him because I lived.

It was pleasant, and yet curious how drowsy one became. Indeed, her figure had grown so distinct in this movement of projected thought that I could have almost fancied myself asleep, were it not that I was aware continually of the embers in the hearth, conscious also of the rain outside and of the silent hall. It must be late; I must be going up; I had intended sitting here but a few minutes.

And then attempting to rise, I found of a sudden that I could not. There came no muscular response to the will. It passed over me with a sense of terror that I was paralyzed from the waist down.

The sensation was not that of a leg or foot asleep. A general numbness had taken possession of the limbs, so as to render them too heavy for movement, an effect which might be compared to that of being half buried. With the live part of me I strained forward again and again, only to sink back; and for a moment, growing dread, cleared the brain of that strange craving for sleep. I realized that something sinister had been at work, an unnatural agency, but what it was I could not imagine. Besides, thought demanded too great an effort. Like a failing pulse, consciousness, as it were, throbbed between periods of lethargy. But this weight of sleep, this rising tide of sleep! Once more an instant of clarity. My eyes fell on the half-emptied glass of wine. I recalled its singular, not unpleasant bitterness of taste. I had considered its color symbolic—of what? Thought drifted away. Of what? Ah, indeed—of life!

With convulsive effort, the mind expended its strength in fighting back the shadows that broke upon it like an advancing surge. Madness was in those shadows, I knew, and after madness, oblivion—the eternal void.

I heard a laugh cackle in the silence, and realized only after a moment that it was mine. Poor, self-complacent dolt, who had dabbled in schemes, who had been tempted by a game of which he had no inkling! Ballion's dupe and inferior—who was I to match myself with him! And like a pitiable fool, now paid in terms of the philosophy I had been admiring. Natural law, survival of the fittest—doctrine comforting to those who survive, but to me become mockery.

Confusion of shadows, insane phantasmagory, a struggle for breath. In the month of May, in the garden they were standing together. I called to them, but no sound came; I strove to drag myself toward them, and had become stone. They laughed—the laughter jeered and echoed. . .

But no: here were the embers of the fire, grown pale, like glazing eyes. In the brief concentration of one at the point of death, I realized how it stood with me, that I must act before the darkness closed again. If I had time, I must call for help, let some one know what had happened, so that at least *he* might pay his penalty. Half of the wine remained as evidence. Then, turning my head with an effort to reassure myself, I saw a white card on the table, and thought shrank as from a lash—

Eleanor!

And I understood now. Rather than Ballion, it was she, unmasked, seen in her final colors, who had laid the snare, led me on, she who doubtless, somewhere in the silent house, sat waiting. The call I intended was never

uttered. Numbness of body became that of soul. It was as if I saw her hands presenting the glass of wine, her white, pitiless hands which I had thirsted for, and which I still loved; it was as if I felt her doom upon me and accepted it mutely, as one who has lost whatever gave life a purpose.

So all the time this had been the truth that lurked in the shadows of Greyhouse, a part of that spirit haunting here. Whether she acted in chief or as accomplice of another made no difference. And I felt toward certainty as I had toward earlier questioning—that this also made no difference. She remained for me sovereign even now, superb beyond good and evil, exalted in herself. And I thought if I could but see her again, one glimpse of her through this rising darkness, a ray to clear the mind once more, that then. . . I had forgotten, forgotten thought. It was too weary a matter to resist the weight and urge of what bore me down. Better to sleep, to yield. Reality became dream.

Curiously enough, however, I remained conscious of my whereabouts, knew that I was sitting before the hearth, and that to breathe was difficult; but the knowledge as to why I sat there and the sense of my predicament had passed. In the timelessness of a dream, I merely knew that I was here, beset by a dim foreboding, and in that eerie remembrance of light that accompanies dreams.

Then I became gradually aware of something. I felt that I was no longer alone; that in the chair next me, wide and deep as mine, some one was seated. Some one. And of whoever it was, I stood in mortal fear. Forcing a glance, I could see nothing, and yet I *knew*. In the chill of suspense, breath came slow; I seemed to have grown rigid; the minutes dragged by. I strove to keep my look averted from the chair, which continued to draw it back.

Then, gazing in spite of myself, I saw all at once raised from within, a hand, grasping the chair-arm. A hand of long, white fingers, now spread out, now closing restlessly; and on one of them was a ring set with a large sapphire.

I do not know why a hand should have instilled such horror, the sense of loneliness, of deadly silence, of helplessness. It recalled in its slow movement the leisure of a cat unsheathing its claws, tense but deliberate. And my dread froze at what I knew would follow.

The hand ceased its movement, gripped the chair; something stirred in the shadow. And then suddenly I beheld a face thrust from the darkness. There followed blindness as at the cutting off of light, but not before I had

recognized that face, or knew who it was that had risen and stood near. I heard a low, harsh laugh. A breath fell like the heavy vapor of dank earth.

Thus I sat blind, spell-bound with fear, beneath the form that was bending down. Gasping, I awaited, as a last throb, the groping of those hands upon me, and knew that it meant death. For was not the one who stood there dead? Was it not the hands of a corpse about my throat that I awaited?

Meanwhile words came, words mumbled in a whisper near me, building a slow meaning: "They opened a door, a door that let Him in. Said I not true! He is hungry still; He will not leave the hunt. They laughed, they would not heed."

Blind, to die blind with this specter of the grave my only watcher! Was it his hands fumbling above my heart? Was it his voice that muttered, "No—insufficient," and again, "No, I say—wait"? Blackness melted into blackness. The vision changed. I saw him standing at the foot of the great stairs, which had become of marble, his head carried high as I had seen him once, his hawk face undaunted; and downward, coming toward him, there was one fair and slight, whose hand seemed to hover along the balustrade. She did not shrink from him who waited. It was all ages ago, I knew—the black cloak flung around her, the flare of a torch. But fear had gone—it was the world of death.

And then followed vacancy.

I have always believed that the poison used was a solution of cannabis indica combined with some other drug. Certainly the dream-haunted stupor points to an intensified form of hashish. But that I was saved at all—and indeed no one could have been nearer death—was due simply to my having left the glass half-finished. Some hours later I found myself staring into the blackened fireplace, with the confused sense of having been awakened, but I was dizzy, exhausted, trembling in every muscle. The lights were still burning, though one felt the approach of dawn.

Little by little detached ideas pieced themselves into memory, though ragged and incomplete. I recalled my dinner with Norse, but for a time nothing more. I could not imagine how I came to be seated here in this miserable condition, nor could I tell at first where I was. Then there recurred an image of a car with flaming headlights backing from a lighted door, together with a sense of rain and darkness. My eyes, throbbing painfully,

concentrated on the stone mantelpiece with its carved escutcheon. Where had I dreamed of it? Why should it seem familiar? Ah, of course—Greyhouse; but why alone before the fireless hearth? It was cold in the hall: I remembered it was that which had wakened me. Glancing at my wrist-watch, I saw that the hour was half-past five.

Then slowly, like separate pools of water joined together by a returning tide, a sequence of thought began to reëstablish itself—crumbling embers, pleasant reveries, an intolerable fear, impossible dreams. I looked apprehensively at the chair near me, and saw it was vacant—at the little table on my right, and noticed a written card. It was this that gave the final cue. Like a released spring, the separate details locked together: the glass of wine, numbness of limbs, realization of the poison. Eleanor!

In the blank recognition of what she had attempted, I felt no particular thankfulness that the attempt had failed. The future stretched out before me indifferent. Anger, desire to punish, even interest as to what her motives had been, were alike absent. They were all broken victuals of an abandoned table. What mattered now, inasmuch as I continued to live, was to drag myself to my room, take a stimulant, and wait until the hour for returning to town. Afterward—but I was careless about afterward.

Rising with great effort, the sense of vertigo returned. I staggered toward the stairway drunkenly and remained semi-conscious, supporting myself by the banister at the lower step. It seemed impossible that I could ever climb the stairs with knees like putty and a heart-action pounding at the least exertion. Then first I became aware of a sound of footsteps and movement above, people hurrying here and there, and wondered vaguely why they should be up at this hour. A footfall sounded on the landing, and looking up I could see Anne Roderick's trained nurse staring down at me.

"Doctor Ames!" she cried. "We thought you hadn't returned last night. I went to your room and found it empty. We've been trying to telephone to your town apartment. I'm glad you're here." Then seeing my evident state of collapse she exclaimed, "But what's the matter?"

"I'm unwell," I answered thickly, "but that will pass. Do you mind giving me a hand?" And when she had come down: "What's wrong? Why have you needed me?"

She peered curiously at my face, which, I suppose, was the color of chalk.

"What's wrong?" I repeated.

She hesitated a moment, and then, with a frightened look, “Anne Roderick is dead.”

“Dead?” I exclaimed, aghast. “Dead?” And there recurred of a sudden that vision of my sleep.

“In the night some time,” she continued. “I don’t know when. I woke to find her uncovered, staring at the window. She didn’t answer, and I went over to her, but she was dead.”

“The window?” I whispered.

“Yes—I suppose it was a sudden attack. But what’s important is for some one to take charge of Miss Eleanor. She’s half distracted. We can’t get her from Anne’s room. Listen.”

Through the twilight of the house, cold in the gray of dawn, came the thin broken sound of a woman weeping. Her hypocrisy, I thought bitterly.

“You should call Mr. Ballion.”

“She won’t let us—she says she won’t see him.”

Slowly I stumbled upward, gasping with the effort. Was this also a continued dream, a place of phantoms? The vagueness of the surroundings, my own dazed condition, all seemed part and parcel of drugged sleep. I remember, supported by the nurse, groping with my hand along the wall of an interminable corridor. I remember standing above a couch on which lay a dead form; but at the side, half-clothed, her face pressed to the lifeless hand, her dark hair covering her shoulders, knelt Eleanor. I spoke to her again and again before she heard. Then, lifting her face stained and distorted, she cried to me: “I kept her here, I killed her when she would have been saved. I let her die at Greyhouse for my own evil will. My sin! My sin!”

There was nothing I could say or do. Indeed, shaken as I was and hardly able to stand, I felt whatever strength I had ebbing.

“Tell Hasta to go in Miss Eleanor’s machine for Doctor Melroy who takes my cases,” I said to the nurse. “I’m afraid I’m out of it.”

“We can’t find Hasta,” she returned, lowering her voice. “He was here last night, but he seems to have gone.”

But I felt too ill even for interest in this statement. “Well, telephone Melroy to come as soon as he can, and tell him about her condition and,” I added, “mine.”

She stared. “What shall I tell him, Doctor, about yours?”

I looked over at the kneeling figure of Eleanor, her bare arms extended on the bed. “Tell him an overdose of morphine,” I answered. And disregarding the nurse’s shocked expression: “About Hasta, call up Captain Norse at the Police Offices. He’ll want to know.”

I managed to regain my room before fainting; but all the while there rang in my ears a cry: “At Greyhouse—my sin! My sin!”

Chapter Thirteen

DONNA È MOBILE

"It's no good," said Norse, eyeing me coolly; "morphine won't *do*. Dr. Melroy knows you don't take it. Carl here knows it, and I know it. Now tell us what *did* occur."

I remained silent.

"It might make it easier for you," observed Ballion, "if I tell you that Hasta was no doubt an infinite scoundrel. I believe he was an accomplice of my brother's, I believe he thought you suspected him, or perhaps knew more than you did. Remember that encounter you had with him at night? I didn't like his face when he told me of it. At all events, he's disappeared, and taken some jewels of Eleanor's with him."

I looked at Norse.

"It's a fact," he agreed. "And I think Carl's probably right in his theory as to why Hasta should attempt to kill you. He's distinctly a bad customer."

"But if—" I began, and then seeing the detective's eyes narrow, stopped short. "But I haven't admitted any attempt," I concluded.

Ballion laughed outright. "Well, then, perhaps this will make confession easier—we've examined the wine in your glass, as well as the sandwiches."

"And you found?" I exclaimed.

"Nothing," returned Norse, "nothing at all. Perfectly good wine, and slightly stale sandwiches. So you thought you had been poisoned with them?" he continued, smiling. "Obviously not."

I could hardly credit my senses. Obviously I *had* been poisoned with the wine; I thought I could even name the drug, and yet here they reported that the Barbera was innocent.

"Who made the examination?" I asked.

"Melroy."

"Why, then, you see," I retorted stubbornly, "that I was telling the truth about the morphine. Don't let's talk any more about it."

Norse smiled. “Very well. I think we’ve learned what we wanted, in any case: I mean regarding your opinion about the wine. We’ll agree that you believed you took a dose of morphine in it, but were mistaken.”

The above conversation took place at Greyhouse on the afternoon following Anne Roderick’s death. I had been wretchedly ill all morning, and was now stretched on the couch in my room, though enough restored to be dressed. Outside, the car waited for me, and I resolved it should be my last drive along that road.

Melroy’s report had affirmed categorically that there was no reason to suspect any other cause for Anne Roderick’s death than heart disease. And he was presumably right. But still haunted by last night’s phantasmagory, I could not help remembering the position in which the nurse had found her; nor could I forget the face I had once imagined to have seen lifting itself up outside the window. And for the sake of air last night that window had been open. But when Ballion had left us and I mentioned the coincidence to Norse, he shrugged his shoulders. “The trouble is that there’s a concrete walk beneath that side of the house, and it’s impossible to discover footprints. I admit that an exceedingly active man could gain the window-ledge. But for what purpose? What possible animus could any one have against the poor girl? Do you know of any?”

I did not; I only knew that what several weeks ago would have been dismissed as superstitiously absurd had now, under the strange guidance of this place, gained credence with me. But as a matter of fact Anne Roderick’s death, Hasta’s disappearance, what Norse believed, were all indifferent as compared with a single issue: Eleanor.

Ballion had admitted casually, but with a black look, that she had refused to see him. Why? What change did this betoken? Did her grief of this morning mean an awakening, an attempt of her former self to regain the mastery, or was it at best merely a sentimental outburst, a self-pleasing gesture, and would she resume the course, indicated by the past two weeks, of becoming more and more an incarnation of the pagan spirit of these surroundings? At all events, if it were true that Hasta was alone guilty of the attempt on me last night, and I was eager to believe it, then I could still indulge my luxury of vain dreams. And I repeat, whatever had been her connection with the tragedy of Greyhouse, it did not greatly affect me. Who was I, indeed, to set up a moral judgment! I remembered my last glimpse of her—the passion of her self-anathema. To me, it was that self only that mattered. And in this I believed myself to have the advantage of Ballion. I

somehow divined that Greyhouse was the link between them, that her spirit of contrition militated against him.

For once Norse's shrewdness was at fault. "If you're thinking about that wine," he remarked, "it might occur to you that nothing would be easier than for Hasta, let's say, to replace the amount left in your glass with fresh wine after you had lost consciousness. I'm not in the least disturbed by Melroy's analysis."

His suggestion explained the problem so easily that I was ashamed not to have thought of it.

"You believe Hasta was responsible, then?" I asked.

He nodded emphatically. "I do."

"In that case, do you think you will be able to lay hands on him?"

"Eventually."

"There's one thing that puzzles me," I declared, "and that is, why, if he wanted to kill me, did he not do so when I was drugged? Why did he take a chance?"

"For the simple reason," answered Norse, "that he believed you had sufficient—and indeed you very nearly had."

Now it was curious how that word "sufficient" groped uncomfortably in my memory toward something which at the moment, and indeed for a long time after, it was unable to find.

"Since you've taken a more reasonable attitude," he went on, "tell me what drug you think was used. It might help investigation."

And as there was no longer a reason for silence, I surrendered and told him, "Some derivative of hashish."

"So!" he returned. "But why on earth couldn't you have told me that before?" Then when I flushed and said nothing, he smiled, adding illogically, "The only good thing in all this is that it will get you and Miss Graham away from here."

"Do you think she will leave?" I objected.

He paused a moment, and it struck me that he seemed more keenly aware of the situation than I imagined. Then he answered thoughtfully, "Yes, I believe she will."

The event proved him right. I learned afterward that she left Greyhouse that same day, after arranging for Anne's burial from one of the city chapels. It appeared that she had gone back to her former school, an Anglican convent on the outskirts of town. But I should have remained ignorant of the fact, had it not been for Carl Ballion, whom I met one night in the reading-room of the club. I stumbled on him by accident ensconced in a chair, a paper on his knees. But he was not reading. His eyes looked off above the smoke of his cigar at the distant wall, and the brief glimpse I had of his face before he noticed me gave an impression of some philosopher in higher mathematics, rapt and impersonal. He greeted me, as it were, with a backward glance at what he had been thinking of. It was an opportunity to ask about Eleanor, which I did.

"She's at St. Clare's," he answered casually, "cut off from the world, the flesh, and the devil—in other words, me, if you please. I thought she had outgrown that kind of romanticism—not that I take it seriously. You might," he added with a faint smile, "see whether you could tempt her out of her cotton-wool. *Donna è mobile.*"

And evincing no further desire for talk, he resumed his smoking.

St. Clare's. I found out where the place was and drove past it once with I know not what confused purpose. It was surrounded with high brick walls. I could see the roof of a chapel, other roofs. The streets about it were deserted, the place itself blank and silent. There was no comfort here even in surmise, and I returned drearily enough to my rooms.

These few days were, I think, among the hardest I have ever spent. I had been living at white heat in an atmosphere of new thought and feeling, and must now adapt myself again to the treadmill. The color, the zest, the lilt of life had faded into sober drab. As one deprived of an accustomed stimulant, I felt a ceaseless craving for the old exhilaration, and found my work petty and my future purposeless. The horizon shrunk; the former limitations reimposed themselves. It was no longer with a sense of adventure that I encountered the day's problems in office or operating room. It was safer to be conservative, follow established practice, more moral to be commonplace. And as always at such times, it seemed inconceivable that this apathy would ever pass, that I would ever rid myself of this useless hunger. I used to think back over the recent weeks, recalling each experience, striving to evoke the feeling that had accompanied it, the mental setting, as it were. In vain; like words without their melody, like pictures void of light, air and perfume, which had given the represented scene significance, memory remained lifeless. I could not recapture the attitude

which had made recent ideas and desires possible. There failed, in short, the magic, potent whether in evil or good, of Greyhouse.

It will no doubt seem strange that I should wish to renew all this. The truth is that any intense emotion, save perhaps that of great physical pain, holds in itself a spice of bitter pleasure. This paradox explains the love of dangerous sport, hardship, and excitement. I had known how passion transfigures life, and I was now bedded in lukewarm insipidity.

There were two things, however, which in a sense lightened the tedium of that period:

First of all, the presentiment of something as yet to come. Nor was it motiveless foreboding: Hasta was still at large, and I knew that if Norse waited it meant anything except inactivity. Moreover, I felt that the situation created at Greyhouse remained unsolved, had been left in an abeyance that the characters of Eleanor and Carl rendered merely temporary. But above all, why should I not confess my growing belief, irrational as it might be, with regard to some impending doom not yet accomplished and not to be avoided. Francis Ballion's prophecy, reiterated in that well-nigh fatal dream, served as a connecting thread between what had passed, and foreshadowed something to follow.

But secondly, the habit of years, interrupted by the brief interval at Greyhouse, reasserted itself. Late impressions began to fade, customary interests and pleasures gained in flavor. It began to dawn that comfort, placidity, and routine are pleasant, that social morality is a better guide than individualism, and that, in short, I ought to be thankful to have escaped the storm. Had it not been for Eleanor, I should no doubt gradually have fallen into step with life; it was the thought of her that made this impossible. Everywhere I was accompanied by the sense of a lost glamor, a lost magnificence, and felt beggared for want of it. The echo of faster heart-beats disturbed the trudge of things.

I was in this comfortless between-stage when, about four days after the events just narrated, there arrived unexpectedly a letter. And from her. It was merely a note which stated that she would like to meet me at a certain place for tea and to discuss various matters. What they were she failed to vouchsafe, the writing being in a crisp, direct style hardly more expansive than a telegram. But to hear from her at all, not to mention the promise of seeing her, was an unhoped-for grace; and then, as I studied every sharply formed character on the page, something struck me at the end. She had hesitated once before the conclusion, had started a sentence beginning "I

long—" and had scratched it out, signing herself, "Sincerely yours." It illustrates clearly enough what state of mind I was in that castles in Spain should rise out of two canceled words. I was absurd enough to complete that sentence in a hundred ways, all flattering, until the hour of our interview.

It seemed to me, as we met at the door of the tea-room, that she had grown strangely white in comparison with my memory of her at Greyhouse; although perhaps the effect was one of contrast with the dress and hat she wore, of complete mourning. She gave the impression of one who has lived through hours which cannot be spoken of, but which add, for all their chastening, strength and distinction to personality. Her eyes bore witness, I thought, to the shadows of long nights, but they were deeper, clearer. It was as if years and not days had passed.

And accordingly I found myself at a loss for words. The usual amenities seemed appallingly banal, more than ever superfluous.

"I drove by St. Clare's," I said among other phrases. "I hoped I might see you, perhaps. It's a forbidding place, St. Clare's."

"Yes," she answered gravely, "I know. I believed that once."

Concerned at her pallor, I remember asking whether she were well.

"Not quite," she said, and then noting my change of expression, "Oh, I don't mean that way. I think you know what I mean."

Although for a while we continued silent or exchanged those surface words which are no more than silence, it was not for lack of understanding. Even the superficial took on unintended meaning in tone or glance. We had shared an experience hard for both of us to speak of, but which drew us together. It was she at length who made a beginning.

"You wonder perhaps why I asked you to meet me. It was because of a letter from Captain Norse."

I repeated the name in an exclamation. What could Norse be getting at!

"I had been confused about what happened that last night," she went on; "above all I couldn't understand why you had taken that drug. I knew you were not that kind. Alone, at St. Clare's, it haunted me. I imagined it was because. . . I feared that another time. . . And heaven knows I had enough to be sorry for. I wrote Captain Norse about it; he told me what actually happened. And now I want to know *why* you made it appear that you were to blame."

Before her clear gaze my own fell. I mumbled some pretext or other.

She said nothing for a time, but I could feel her eyes searching me. “Was it,” she whispered in the end, “was it because of that note I left with the wine?”

“No,” I said; but after another pause she added, “And you thought *that* of me!” Her voice expressed neither anger nor reproval, but fear.

I could wish myself anywhere from beneath her gaze. Stricken, ashamed, I could only look down. My lips formed at last the single word: “Forgive!”

“Oh,” she said in a low voice, “I wasn’t thinking of that. I was remembering that although you thought that of me—and I had given you enough cause—still you preferred to shield me, even at the price, if necessary, of your own good name.”

Her praise, in view of the temptation I had passed through with regard to Carl, shamed me even more. “Please!” I cried.

“And I was remembering something else,” she continued. “I was remembering a certain night when mad as I was, faithless as I was to every memory in the fever of that place, except for you I should have dishonored myself utterly. And I recall how I repaid you day by day with every slight I could think of—coldness, contempt—the poor mimic of Carl Ballion.”

“Please!” I said again.

“You’re right,” she returned, “we shouldn’t dwell on all that. It’s over with, and the price is paid. But there’s one thing,” she added, “that I want you to know. You asked me once if I loved Carl Ballion, and whatever I answered doesn’t matter now. I do not love him. But oh,” and she spoke almost in a whisper, her lips trembling, “I fear him! When I think that in May. . . It wasn’t easy to give up caring for him; but I understand what he is because of what I had become. And I’m afraid,” she repeated.

“Does he know?” I asked.

She nodded, and I was conscious of a certain dread in her eyes. “I told him yesterday that it was the end between us. He acted as you would imagine. He used all his will, his power—we were in the reception room of the convent—you know what eloquence he has—I could almost feel myself again in the hall at Greyhouse—that strange, spiced air. Somehow I had the strength. In the end he was all regret, very gentle and considerate. Not for one minute did he lose control of himself. And all the while I knew that his thought weighed, measured, beat as steadily as his pulse. And all the while I was afraid.”

I could easily imagine that scene, the two wills locked together in passionate struggle within the bare convent room. And as she evidently believed, I felt also that it had not meant the end.

"I hope you won't think," she continued, "that this is simply a reaction after what happened the other night. I shall never love Carl Ballion. I understand what he is by realizing what he had made of me. And yet it's strange that however much I loathe myself, I have no feeling of the kind toward him. He lives by a different code, holds by his own nature. What was disgrace for me doesn't affect him. Only my life would have been," she bowed her head, "like the last weeks. I'm sick of mind, beauty, strength that lives merely for itself. And I wanted you to know."

The thought that came to me expressed itself involuntarily: "Why?"

"Because," she said, "if you imagined me capable of what you suspected the other night, you may have believed that I was concerned"—she seemed to force the words from her—"in Celia's death. I read between the lines of Norse's letter. I could see how you thought of me, and I could not blame you—but oh, think of me as insensible, cruel, degraded, only believe me innocent of that."

"But, Eleanor," I exclaimed desperately, "you must realize that even then I didn't care."

"And it was because you did not," she answered, "or rather because you cared for me that I wanted you to know."

I understood then how shabby a contrast I must offer with Carl Ballion. His ease would have found a ready answer. Dazed by the notion that any thought of mine should have importance with her, I could merely express what came uppermost, bitter in its inadequacy, "Care for you! If, being as I am, I only had the right to care!"

And then her words, incredible beyond dreams, which remain for me the summit of the years: "You only have that right."

It would be superfluous, as it is impossible, to describe the glory, the humility, the transcendence of that hour and the hours that followed when I had left her at the doorway of St. Clare's. Fancy alone untrammeled by words can give a reflection of them. I had been lifted, as it were, from the void to the gates of Paradise. Gone apathy, lack of purpose, inertness of mind—gone as well that craving for the past which, compared with this, I saw now as it was, sensual, corrupt, and dishonored—gone in the radiance

of this flame. The world was transfigured by a miracle, became, even in its autumn bareness, royal, pulsing with music and promise.

Men in that state are proverbially ungrateful. I chafed now at the thought of waiting, at the months of retirement she had imposed on herself at St. Clare's. We were to meet occasionally, but not until spring—Easter, she said—would she take part in usual social life. Then, in the autumn, perhaps. . .

But we were to meet in two days, on Thursday. I resolved to forget the remoter future and confine my impatience to what was near at hand.

Before parting, Eleanor had referred to a subject that naturally preoccupied us both: "It seems to me Carl has the right to know how matters are. In fact, it would be inexcusable not to be open with him. And if you don't mind, hard as it is, I'm going to write him a letter."

There was doubtless a very human element of triumph, not unmingled with concern, in my notion as to how he would receive that letter.

Chapter Fourteen

MEDUSA'S HEAD

Under any circumstances, it is hard enough to congratulate a successful rival; but when the latter has been an acquaintance, a guest, has infringed unscrupulously rights usually respected, congratulations might even savor of weakness. I confess that my attitude toward Carl Ballion was greatly altered by the splendid way in which he accepted his ill fortune. Because, naturally, of weakness in his case there could be no question.

I was sitting alone in the club an evening or so later, and, as it happened, was at the very moment attracted by headlines of a campaign speech Ballion had delivered the day before. The subject of Prohibition was at that time becoming an issue in state politics, and evidently his treatment of it had occasioned considerable discussion. "Social hygiene not a religious principle," I read. "Ballion deplores sectarian fanaticism as confusing issue." In well-balanced paragraphs I traced the peculiar clarity of his thought, which compelled admiration however much I disliked its author.

There was a mirror in front of me, and at last glancing up from the paper, absorbed in some new turn of the argument, it was not without a start that I saw his reflection as he stood leaning over me from behind. He had apparently been reading over my shoulder, and our looks met in the glass; whereupon he smiled, and coming around seated himself near-by. I recalled that this was not the first time I had discovered him behind me without hearing his approach, and, no little embarrassed in any case to find myself alone with him, I mentioned his lightness of tread.

"It's a family characteristic, I believe," he returned carelessly, "at least my father had it. So you've been reading the speech. Do you approve?"

"Entirely. I believe it's the kind of word the public needs."

"And never listens to," he answered. "The public is a pack of emotions and appetites. I'm constantly making the mistake of forgetting that the public never thinks, but wants to be stimulated with strong feelings. The speech was a blunder. I transgressed the first 'don't' of the politician in making an intellectual appeal. Poor fool!"

"How is the election going?" I asked.

“Oh, as far as I’m concerned,” he replied calmly, “it’s lost. That affair of Francis’s has been used against me to the hilt. If I had cared to hedge on the Prohibition question, it would have been forgotten. But, Ames, whatever I may be, I have a certain reverence for human thought. I won’t pose as an imbecile even to gain office.” And, struck by a certain ring in his voice, I realized that he was speaking the truth. “I’m indifferent, though,” he continued. “There’s a federal appointment offered me, if I can afford to accept it. But that’s neither here nor there. I had a letter this morning from Eleanor.”

He paused, and every nerve of mine sprang alert.

“She told me,” he went on, “that she cared for you, and did it with the same frankness that she used recently in dismissing me. I have no comments to make except that I wish you both happiness, and I have already expressed this to her.”

I answered with the conventional thanks.

“Not at all,” he took me up. “I like you and I’m devoted to her. No doubt she has chosen wisely. I’m under the shadow of what happened at Greyhouse, and possibly would have made her unhappy. One accepts facts as they are.” He lit a cigarette, and repeated, “Facts as they are! Some men, I suppose, would be out of patience with you for,” and he laughed, “playing them such a trick. I’m not. I rather admire you for it, for outwitting me—though in the case of so rare a girl as Eleanor, the expression sounds more flippant than I mean. I don’t blame you in the least, because I should have done the same. One cannot stand on formalities in love and life. It’s a matter of every man for himself, my dear Ames, and devil take the hindmost. So there’s my hand on it.”

He leaned forward and shook my hand warmly. There was in all this an undercurrent of chagrin, indeed of sadness, which in the case of so proud a man as Ballion touched me. At a stroke, his generosity atoned for the slights and contempt I had suffered from him, and I pitied, respected, and rather liked him.

“There are times and tides,” he said, “which exemplify the adage that it never rains but it pours. Everything had gone well with me, too well. I had always been lucky. Then in two weeks occur the tragedy of Celia and Francis, the certainty of political defeat, and hardest of all this loss of Eleanor. Blind luck! Now heads, now tails. Let’s hope,” and his smile invited sympathy, “that my next throw will be more fortunate.”

"I'm sure of it," I replied, not to be outdone in good feeling.

"Are you?" he queried. Then laughing, "Well, my very next scheme depends on you, and I hope you'll indulge me. In a few words, it's this: the process of dividing the Graham and Ballion estates includes an inventory scheduled at Greyhouse for to-morrow afternoon, which Eleanor has to attend. Our attorney and the appraisers will arrive at two. Now in spite of what painful associations the place has for Eleanor, it occurred to me that as long as she must be there in any case, she might at least do me the kindness of coming in time for lunch. She owes me a little reparation and so do you. I told her that yesterday when I called with my rueful good wishes, and she consented, providing you could arrange it. Don't tell me you can't!"

"I'll be delighted," I answered, charmed equally by his manner and by the prospect of an earlier glimpse of Eleanor. "Of course."

"Good!" he exclaimed. "It's appropriate, don't you think, for the three of us to sit together once more at the same table in Greyhouse?"

I had hoped to drive by for Eleanor and take her out with me; but it appeared that there were matters for discussion in regard to the inventory, and they had arranged to meet at Greyhouse earlier in the morning.

"Half-past twelve," he enjoined, "not a moment later. I apologize in advance for the service. Since that blackguard, Hasta, disappeared, I've taken on a very indifferent butler. But I promise one thing."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Champagne—not Barbera this time." He shook his head gravely. "That was a close shave for you; but at least it explained matters. I was utterly mistaken in the man. And by the way, I hear Norse is to be cashiered—poor old Norse. I'm afraid he's not very competent, but I can't understand why he's not been able to find Hasta. Well, to-morrow, then. Au revoir."

With another cordial grasp of the hand, he strolled away, nodding to several acquaintances at the door.

He remained very much in my mind that evening. I regretted misjudging him, and indeed, were it not that lovers are shameless, I would have reproached myself. He had shown a magnanimity in keeping with his talents and reputation, a breadth of nature which, I realized, far exceeded mine. I understood his popularity, his host of friends, and a success phenomenal at his age, which, as I recall, was then barely thirty-two. Comparing him with myself, even vanity had to admit that Eleanor had been mercifully blind. Nothing but luck could account for it—the ill wind of her experiences at

Greyhouse which had blown me good. I foresaw a distinguished career before him which might lead to any height; I wondered if later, in view of his achievements, she would not regret.

It occurred to me that a proof of Ballion's fascination was shown in the way he had evidently allayed her dread of him, which she had expressed so recently. Of course a woman would dread the disappointment of such a man. Any one else with his force would have made her feel it; but apparently his regard for her included acquiescence in her decision, even if it was against him. I could realize well enough how he had persuaded her, and I was thankful he had. It was indeed, as he phrased it, appropriate that the three of us should conclude our mutual adventure as friends and in the same surroundings where it had begun. It would lessen whatever bitterness remained; it might inaugurate a pleasant, normal relationship.

I felt, of course, a certain misgiving—and who under the circumstances would not?—that his charm, combined with the peculiar atmosphere of Greyhouse, might affect her attitude toward me; but on this point she reassured me herself that very evening. I had telephoned to ask about *her* interview with Ballion.

"Don't think it strange," she said, "that I accepted the invitation. I couldn't have refused. It was such a relief to find him generous and kind instead of angry. His references to you and our future really touched me. He was superb. Besides, as he said, I would have to go to Greyhouse anyway about the inventory. You don't mind?"

"No. . . but I'm afraid. . ."

"Of what?"

"He's very attractive."

I could hear her frank laugh. "Are you beginning to worry so soon? Please don't! There's no danger in the least." And she added a few other things that are hardly necessary to repeat; but, as the saying is, I slept on them very happily, and impatient for to-morrow.

The morning dragged by in expectation. It brought something of a thrill to think that we were to meet—and in Greyhouse, but under such altered conditions. The rôles were now reversed between Carl and myself, however much I endeavored to make it easy for him.

It happened that at half-past eleven, having finished with the hospital routine, I chanced to be passing the Municipal Building, and remembered that Norse had not heard as yet of my good fortune. I had grown fond of him, and besides owed him a good deal on the score of his letter to Eleanor; but, above all, there were few with whom I had the right at this stage to talk about her, and that, as any one of experience will allow, was an elemental need. Telling the chauffeur to wait outside, I went up to his office.

He received me more cordially than ever, and impassive as he was seemed in the highest good humor, which, as I unfolded my news, found vent at length in an enthusiastic "Bravo!" He shook both my hands: "At least that much good has come out of Greyhouse!"

"So," I returned, "you don't think Eleanor guilty any longer!"

"My dear man, I never did."

"And you see," I went on, "by not taking your advice, and not shunning the pitfalls you kept hinting at, I'm without any doubt the happiest man alive."

He grinned. "Fool's luck, Richard! Except for that, you'd neither be alive nor happy. But I admit you have the right to crow, long and loud. She's one of the finest girls I've known."

"It's a pity," said I, "that you aren't invited as a fourth at our luncheon to-day in Greyhouse—"

"What!"

"Yes, that's really the best part of it. Carl has been wonderfully decent, and has asked Eleanor and me—"

I stopped, amazed at the change in him: he had become suddenly intent, his lips pressed together, his eyes blazing.

"Were you," he spoke with an effort, "were you going to take Miss Graham with you?"

"No; you see, there was to be an inventory this afternoon of various objects in the house, and she went out this morning with Carl—"

"Alone?"

"Why, yes, if—"

"When?" he cried.

"I'm not sure, perhaps several hours ago."

He had let his hands drop to his sides.

"Can't you tell me," I began, "what's wrong?"

He raised his head sharply. "Why, yes, I'll tell you. It concerns the life of Eleanor Graham—and I'm going to be fourth at that luncheon, if we're not too late."

He slammed open a drawer and I saw an automatic tossed, as it were, into his pocket. With another gesture he had caught up his hat, and with a third pushed me before him to the door.

"Hurry, man—hurry!"

Infected by his excitement, I sprang on in front of him, and could hear him call back orders to some one as he followed me down the stairs.

"Your car," he shouted, and even before we had leaped in, "Make better than your best speed," he said to the man; "break every rule. I'm responsible. Greyhouse, of course."

As the car shot from the curb I had a glimpse of police officers running down the steps of the building, and before we had taken the first turn I could hear the horns of several machines behind us.

Norse sat leaning forward in his seat, his face like stone. Again and again I attempted a question above the almost constant shriek of our klaxon, but he shook his head. And indeed it was hardly the time for conversation—around corners, past angry policemen, through traffic-crowded streets—that we escaped death that day still remains a mystery, that we did not kill some one else an even greater miracle. Certainly our chauffeur proved himself.

On through emptier streets, people scattering in front of us.

"Let her out!" cried Norse. I remember thinking that his will had become our driving power, which seemed to cut our way through obstacles, lifting us on, goading us on.

Out we flashed at last on the lower reaches of the highway which wound up to the plateau. And there was nothing in front.

"Let's see what you can do," he called, as if we were at the start of our race; "every ounce in her, every drop of speed!" And the car answered with a bound forward.

On—up—the hill melted before us. There leaped into view in the near distance the trees and walls of Greyhouse. Then, as we neared the gates, "Now slow—slow down to normal." And for the first time he looked back.

“We’ve outdriven them,” he said, “but we can’t wait; we must take our chance.”

A man suddenly emerged from the hedge by the roadside. It was Roose. “Watch this point,” said Norse to him, “then follow with the rest,” and I heard him mutter about orders he had failed to give. We were already on the driveway. Once again I essayed a question.

“You’ll know soon enough,” he returned, and to the man: “Here, reach over your gun. Now,” he said, handing it to me, “you may have to use it, but use it first.” And as we came broadside to the doorway I saw that he had drawn his own.

Thus for an instant, tense, cold with anxiety as to the reason for which I had but a confused notion, we stood facing the blank door. Norse’s hand was on the bell. Somewhere in the house, I could hear its far-off summons, and then footsteps inside.

The door swung back, revealing the hall apparently empty; but whoever had opened it did not immediately appear. I was on the point of entering, when Norse pushed in front. We were hardly across the threshold when, at one and the same instant, the door slammed shut and a figure leaped at us—to be stopped, nailed rather, on the point of Norse’s automatic.

It was Hasta—smooth-shaven, swarthy, lithe—Hasta reinstated as the embodied shadow of Greyhouse, unaccountably appearing as if from nowhere, snake-like and deadly. I gazed at him thunderstruck.

But there was, in this moment at least, one apparent change: his assurance had vanished. The flame of what he intended faded in his eyes and left them staring. His upper teeth showed. It was the face of a bewildered devil.

“Good!” said Norse coldly, “we meet again. It’s hands up, I fancy.”

With a slow, numb movement the man obeyed.

“I hope,” continued the other in a singular dry voice, “that you’ll be careful now, that you won’t grow absent-minded and forget who I am.” And with a sudden lash of tone: “Speak out! Where are your master and Miss Graham?”

“Upstairs,” mumbled Hasta.

Reaching up, though without shifting his glance, Norse disentangled a strap from the butler’s fingers which controlled a small, leather-covered

knob, and immediately afterward removed a revolver from the man's pocket. Both of these he tossed aside.

"Now, step in front of us and show the way, and keep those hands up!"

The fellow moved, apparently stupefied; but at the very moment of passing in front, I saw his eyes shift; his hand fell in a sharp, lightning blow to Norse's wrist, the automatic crashed to the floor, and he sprang toward the library.

It was incredible daring, vain as it was reckless. I fired. The shot roared in the silence of the hall, and Hasta reeled, stretching out both his hands, but still plunged on. He clutched at the knob of the door. There followed the report of Norse's gun, fired stooping and almost, it seemed to me, before he had recovered it. Bending forward, supported an instant by the panels, the man crumpled down with a long, rasping cry. Before we reached him a stream of blood, like an ugly ribbon, had begun to wind from his mouth.

Norse pushed him aside with his foot. "That took nerve," he said, "but at least he showed us the way. No, leave him—we haven't time." He put his hand to the knob. "And keep alert now: we've got worse than that ahead."

He opened the first door and bent his head listening, then opened the second; but upon entering, a glance sufficed to show that the room was empty. And for the first time since leaving his office the energy which had seemed to burn white in him appeared to fail. It was, however, despair I saw rather than surprise, in the blank look he cast about him.

"They're upstairs after all," I ventured, breathless. And as he began to pace back and forth: "In heaven's name, let's do something—we can't stop here. But perhaps the danger's over, now that Hasta—"

He seemed to pay no attention, but at last: "They're not upstairs. Listen: from the very first I've believed in a hidden space connected with this room. It must exist. No other idea is tenable; nothing else explains the facts. But I don't know where it is. I've searched below and here. I've taken measurements—useless. I'm *beaten*." He clenched his hands. "But in spite of that, there *is* a secret room, and unless we find it—" Drops of sweat stood on his forehead. Frozen by his manner, I could only stare at him, speechless. "I had a theory once," he added, "wrong, evidently—" And slowly, like one without expectation, he moved toward that angle of the room which held the narrow door. "A theory," he continued, "that—"

I heard a subdued exclamation. He stood looking down with a new intentness, and upon joining him, its cause was immediately apparent. At

our feet lay the carved face of the Medusa, but what I saw was new. The slab had sunk to about an inch below the level, and the end of a cloak, obviously dropped by chance, projected down between it and the next flagstone.

It was a cloak I remembered. Eleanor had worn it at our last meeting.

Norse pressed with his foot, and the stone yielded, sinking another couple of inches. Stooping over, his fingers on the carving, he pushed feverishly here and there. Almost at once the block slipped to one side beneath the floor and disclosed a well, pierced in the corner foundation of the house itself and lined with a steel ladder—a black tube. But as we stood looking down, I caught in its depths what seemed a glimmer of pale light. There rose a breath of earth from the darkness, but not a sound, no whisper to break the silence. We might have been looking into the pit of Death.

Our glances met, reflecting the same dread. “If we’re not too late,” muttered Norse, one foot on the ladder—“that’s the question. And I’m afraid __”

Chapter Fifteen

BLIND ADDERS

The depth of the ladder was not great—some twenty feet at most—but what with anxiety and the ignorance of where we were going, the time seemed long before we reached the bottom. Step by step we seemed to lower ourselves from the known into a world of night, where some invisible destiny awaited us. Under these circumstances, imagination got out of control and strung the nerves to a point well-nigh of panic. Hence it was a vast relief when the ladder ended and we found ourselves at the mouth of a short tunnel, which must have led underground to the side of the house, and at the end of which appeared light, shading from vividness to the obscurity where we stood.

Here it was that I felt Norse's grip on my arm. "Quiet," he whispered almost inaudibly. "Quiet. Everything may depend on it. Above all don't act without word from me. Now go ahead, but keep hold on yourself."

We followed the length of the tunnel. It was impossible to hear Norse, whose shoes were padded; as for me, I walked as quietly as possible. The light, radiating from the underground chamber beyond, increased. But all at once I became aware of a vision, increasing likewise in distinctness, though at first so improbable that I did not grasp its meaning. The effect was that of an object seen through the wrong end of a telescope, at first in an unreal remoteness, but becoming definite on nearer approach. And in this way, as it were, horror grew on me, took form, confirmed itself as actual. And at last I realized what it was I saw. But the sight resembled something out of the far past, as if one looked in a magic crystal capable of evoking it—vivid as life, but with a visionary unreality.

Beyond the threshold, I remained staring at what centered the gaze like an actual Medusa. From Norse, who had come behind, I heard a sibilant intake of the breath.

Before us, at the other end of the room, stood Eleanor. But there was no movement or life in her attitude. A form in chiaroscuro it seemed—the blackness of her gown against skin colorless as marble; her hair in serpent-coils upon neck and brow, shading the sightless face, half-bowed, that yet seemed to gaze at us in hopeless submission. If fear, if agony which has

brought peace at last are ever beautiful, they were beautiful here, but with a dreadful fascination.

Then I realized that she was not standing at all, that she was hanging, her arms twisted behind her, the body crossed by cords at first invisible against her dress, but holding the limbs, which sagged forward. And from behind her head rose the mass of a black post.

All this, which requires a length of words to render was perceived, of course, in a moment's space. That central form in its tragic significance momentarily shut out every other object; but almost at once I was conscious of another person whose back was turned toward us, sitting on a low bench apparently absorbed in contemplation of the woman; and even as I was about to spring forward, a voice strangely familiar drawled through the silence: "Have you got him, Hasta? Upstairs, is he? Well, fetch him down. But look how beautiful she is. Fatal beauty, eh? I loved her, Hasta."

At that rising and straightening himself to full height he turned leisurely and there stood before us, forming part of the incredible nightmare, Carl Ballion.

It would be vain to describe the sensation of that moment, or rather vortex of sensations. From where he stood, his body concealed that of Eleanor, so that he seemed to have risen up in place of her. And the image of him there remains forever stamped on my mind, detached as a portrait—tall, poised, graceful, the smile still on his lips, but in his eyes an alert comprehension.

The servant had shown amazement and dismay at what had fallen on him like a bolt—not so his master. No twitch of muscle, no change of face betrayed the least surprise or other feeling. He stood at ease, he smiled still; it was only in his gaze that one could read how clearly he understood. But even here there was no token of disconcertment, let alone of fear. As in the eyes of a panther the light seems to withdraw itself, crouching before it blazes into passion, so I remember the look of Carl Ballion which at that moment rested on Norse and myself. There was an interval of that kind of silence which, as a marksman aims, precedes the crack of a rifle; but when he spoke at last, it was in the same leisurely drawl.

"So! Captain Norse comes to lunch at Greyhouse! I wasn't prepared for him. I didn't know. . . . But it's quite fit and proper. Welcome, by all means. I trust you'll like the menu."

His voice resembled the insufferable purr of a beast before it rises to a snarl. “And the doctor, my accomplished friend, who after sneaking and finessing behind my back and blundering about, thought he outwitted me! And the lady, who thought she could play fast and loose with me, and has learned better. Welcome, every one!”

Norse’s voice, clear and metallic, cut in. “Fine talk! But you’re hardly in a position to indulge your wit. Hands up! Hasta has found out what trifling means.”

“Why, has he?” Ballion stood motionless. “I’ll wager he died game. And do you think to impose on me with your guns and swagger? Do you think I’ll be your jumping-jack—I, Carl Ballion?” There was perhaps a trace of the Latin in his manner; but if ever pride of race, pride of name, pride of self, flared up in a single man, it was now. He laughed out: “You forget I am master here. You forget my breed. You come to hunt me, you jackals”—his voice leaped to a roar—“well, then, look to yourselves, for the hunt is on!”

What happened came quicker even than thought. I remember the crash of Norse’s automatic, intolerably loud in that close place; but Ballion had leaped aside. I remember him like a crouching shadow against the wall—one glimpse of Eleanor’s motionless form. All this intermingled as if simultaneous.

And then blackness, blind, impenetrable, a surrounding mass.

Thought, as I say, lagged behind, and only after a second I realized what had happened—that he had reached the control of the lights and had turned them off.

A voice jeered somewhere in the darkness, “And every man for himself, as the distinguished doctor knows.” But at the same moment came another pandemonium of sound from Norse’s gun—and an answering laugh.

We were two to one, but that one had all the advantage. It was we who were on the defense, we who were in danger, not Ballion. His lightness of tread made him an indefinite part of the surrounding blackness. He knew every foot of the place. He knew where we stood, and each blind step revealed our movements. I had a vague consciousness that the room was provided with various stands holding glass cases from which, when the lights were on, had come a scattered glittering—evidently Francis Ballion’s gems—but one could not move without groping among these, whereas he, on the other hand, was sure of himself.

Our single comfort lay in the fact that we were armed; but it was short-lived. Of a sudden, a ray of light from Norse's pocket-lamp reached out, stabbing here and there, and almost at once an ear-splitting shot ripped the silence. I heard the tinkle of metal on stone, and a whispered oath from Norse: "Good it was only my left hand!"

Another deafening report. A blow on my shoulder. I found myself against the wall, darkness, as it were, strangling me, a burning pain. I believe I must have cried out. An arm from near-by half lifted me, and Norse's voice in my ear, "Back, back—the tunnel! We can't match him here." And guiding me a pace or two, even as another shot rang out, harmless this time, I found myself in what was no doubt the passage.

"Flatten yourself," hissed Norse; "the devil can't see, at least."

No, but he could hear. Another racket of sound; a puff of air at my face showed how close the bullet passed.

There followed dead quiet, the quiet of an ambush, of coiled expectancy where each grain of time falls as if distilled in a choked hour-glass. I wondered why he had ceased firing, as long as he knew where we were; but then realized that he was doubtless saving his ammunition for a certain shot—that, or reloading. I wondered if there were another outlet to this cave than where we were standing. Fear, whetted by fancy, began to whisper that of a sudden I should feel a hand groping upon me in the darkness. I remember thinking of the house above with its treasures of art and stately rooms, and ourselves like blind adders puffed with venom below—a reverse of the medal.

Meanwhile, however, one consciousness dominated the rest as a central and unvarying fact, the sense, namely, of an inert body and staring face wrapped in the darkness, standing, as it were, like an impassive image. And however much nerve and spirit were beset at the moment, there dominated them also a thirst of rage, grief become passion, that excluded any surrender to fear. It was simply this grave-like obscurity and silence, the uncertainty, that was hard to stand.

My shoulder throbbed like an inflamed pulse and I felt a sensation of moisture along the side, but I knew that the bullet had not disabled me, had inflicted only a flesh wound. Would nothing break this pause, no discharge of the energy which seemed accumulating spark by spark, no sound for the mind to clutch at!

And then a sound came. Shrill, inarticulate, a scream filled the vault with a soulless quaver, rose three times loud, inhuman, and was still. It was unbearable sound, the sort that unhinges thought, that makes one cringe from its repetition. It resembled a call of despairing madness that summons death to strike and have done. And a moment passed before the mind could hazard a realization of what it meant—that it was the scream of a woman, but so demoniac and anguished that one shrank before superstitious imagining.

Then I believe something gave way in me. I cried out "Eleanor!" I tore myself from Norse's grasp and leaped headlong into the darkness, without thought or fear, toward the motionless figure beyond.

"Eleanor!"

Frenzy, of course. I might have known that I could never cross that room. In an instant I found myself linked to a body that bore me down. But frenzy lends strength. Somehow I had gripped his wrist and for a moment was able to hold back the muscles that surged against me like steel coils. It was enough. As quickly as he had sprung, he released me and was gone. And I understood why; for Norse's voice from above asked if I was hurt. Ballion had not dared expose himself to that attack.

But now a fifth shot rang out. I heard a low cry from Norse as he sank down upon me. It seemed that the hour of despair had indeed struck. But almost at once a breath at my ear murmured, "Keep still."

What the effect of this ruse would have been I don't know, for at that moment came a confusion of voices and shouts from above along the tunnel. Norse fired, I believe, at random. There sounded a ringing of feet on the steel bars of the ladder; rays of light shot from the mouth of the passage; a hurry of people above, descending and nearing us.

"Look out in the tunnel," cried Norse.

The warning was not superfluous, but it came too late. A babel of noise intensified, as if in a megaphone, roared suddenly—cries, oaths, scuffle of feet, vociferation, every token of struggle at close quarters. We were up by now, and in the vague penumbra of light from some electric torch gained the impression of a knotted mass blocking the passage and swaying back and forth.

"Let him through," called Norse; "nail him when he gets to the ladder." But his voice mingled without effect in the growing tumult. "Here!" he shouted at me, "we must get Eleanor Graham from in front of that opening."

We found the pillar; the cords yielded somehow; I felt the limpness of her body as we dragged it back into an angle of the place, but whether alive or dead there was no time to learn. For we had acted none too soon. Another reinforcement was now descending. Whereupon a figure, a darker blot in the almost complete obscurity, shook himself loose from the scrimmage and bounded back with such violence that he sent Norse reeling against me.

Then once more, but this time into the tunnel choked with men, Carl Ballion fired.

There followed somewhere a cry long-drawn, an explosion of voices, yells of "He's down! Look out, don't trample him." And then everything submerged in a fusillade of shots.

Into the room now burst a number of men. But here Norse's voice dominated: "Use your flashlights! Redsby, guard the door—Roose, the ladder. And now at him, you others! Beat him down!"

A voice rose in the darkness, suave, urbanely modulated, in contrast with the fever and confusion: "Oh, so easy! Only a stroke or two! Here I am—Carl Ballion!"

If what followed were not personal experience, a report of it would seem to me incredible. There commenced in the flickering succession of rays and shadows an obscure battle of one against many, a phantom combat, as if this were indeed a place where ghosts continued the rage and violence of life. A surge of pent-up sound. A leaping and shifting of forms. A face lightning-sharp and then gone. A fist lifted to strike. Gasps for breath. Oaths of bafflement or pain.

Oddly enough, the advantage for Ballion lay in the very numbers he fought against. Although armed, his assailants could not use their weapons without greater risk to themselves than him, whereas each of his blows scored. Moreover, he had the advantage of the dark. The flashlights tossed here and there in the mêlée, uncertain and futile. Some were broken. And when I groped along the wall to where I had seen him reach for the electric control, I found that he had twisted it off. Thus the struggle resolved itself into one at close quarters and hit or miss. But, for all that, the miracle remained that one man stood against fifteen, held them on even terms, and brought down one after the other.

Strong as he was—and I, although an average man, had been helpless against him—his agility served him even more at this point. He would free himself from a group, be lost momentarily in the darkness, and then

suddenly in a different part of the room some one would be struck off guard by an invisible hand, and more likely than not be hurled down. By these tactics he kept them scattered, confused, and more than once at grips with each other. No one could hear him, no one singly could resist him. His quickness, strength, and resourcefulness seemed inexhaustible. And it became apparent that he took a fierce pleasure in this fight, even welcomed it, exulted in it. From time to time he would call out the same phrase, his voice ringing ominously, "Here I am—Carl Ballion!"

It was a lure as well as a boast. Flinging themselves in that direction, raking the blackness with their torches, the men would find nothing; but an instant later some one straggling from the others would be beaten down by his fist or revolver butt.

"Here I am—Carl Ballion!"

It became a taunt, a refrain; it acquired the significance of a battle-cry. And fear began to spread among these men, who were trained to such work. One could feel, as it were, the approach of fear, a growing hesitation of movement, an increasing silence. A man near me was panting and muttering to himself. A groan echoed somewhere.

"Form a circle," shouted Norse. "Get your lights on him and close in! Are you going to let yourselves be beaten?"

But that circle was never formed. A yell of pain echoed under the vault, followed by the thud of a body. A rush, less spirited, began in that direction; but then not far from us, Ballion's call.

"God!" I heard Norse swear, "if my left hand wasn't broken!"

And then the worst happened. There sounded, roar upon roar, the crash of a revolver. A bullet flattened itself next to me. Some one fell, bringing one of the remaining stands to the pavement with a splintering of glass. The reason was evident. Ballion had been able to get possession of one of the police automatics. And panic swept down like a wind. Cries of men utterly unnerved, feet stumbling toward the passage-way.

"Here I am—Carl Ballion!"

Somewhere I heard Norse's voice above the scuffle; he had managed to rally them at the door. A ray of light, like a fleshless arm, stretched here and there across the deserted room, above a tangle of bodies and broken wood, flashed upon and held fixed a tall form, who at the very moment tossed away an empty revolver. This time it held him inexorably. The face showed white, eager, smiling; his ruffled hair had formed in curls above the forehead

—a singularly youthful face for all its hawk-like intensity. Stretching out one hand, he laughed, springing full at the light and the group confronting him. Norse fired. I saw him swerve to one side, but his momentum carried. And then came darkness once more, and his voice choked off in a smother of bodies ". . . Carl Ballion!"

Chapter Sixteen

THE FALCON

In the dank, thick air, hard to breathe and heavy with the stench of powder fumes, I felt a growing weakness, to which also the wound in my shoulder contributed. Hence the remainder of that scene, until we emerged in the room above, has left only a dim impression. I recall that the lights were suddenly turned on and disclosed a sight comparable alone with what I was afterward to witness in France—the effect of shrapnel exploding in a crowded space. Six men were found dead amid the wreckage of splintered stands and glass cases, several more were badly wounded, and every one showed some trace of the struggle. It was an unspeakably hideous shambles.

Harsh, blood-stained faces peered down at the figure of Eleanor, over whom Norse and I were bending. "She's alive," I remember muttering again and again in a dazed way, not comprehending my own vast relief when her first pulse-throb revealed the truth. Dimly also I remember helping to carry her through the smoke-filled tunnel, and recall the strange brightness of light as we emerged into the library. It was a condition, I believe, which the others shared—a haggard group of scarecrows, all of us, as we stood in the sunlight.

But the faintness passed. Eleanor having been temporarily cared for, and other medical aid summoned, I gave what help I could to those who needed it. Norse's left hand was disabled, Redsby and another had fractured skulls, and there were various wounds that required attention. As for Eleanor, she was apparently suffering from extreme shock, and it was impossible to tell at once what the result might be. Her breathing had become regular, which augured well, but she had not regained consciousness, nor indeed did she come to herself until some hours later.

The need for these attentions was so imperative that only when I had finished with Norse's injury did I have time definitely to look back upon what had passed. Our glances met in that speechless understanding of two men who have shared mutually and survived a critical experience.

"It's no question here," he said, "of all's well that ends well. I'm glad about Miss Graham, of course. But it's a black day for me when I think of those poor fellows." He looked down, and I could see the sharp-cut lips tremble. "Still," he added, "in our trade one must be ready for that."

“And what,” I asked, “has become of Ballion?”

We had turned the library into a first-aid ward, not so inappropriate, after all, to those old banners that hung down over us, nor to the armor ranged beneath them. Norse pointed to the hall.

“He’s there. You’d better have a look. I imagine he needs anything you can do.”

“I don’t see why we should bother,” I returned. “Any death would be too good for him.”

Norse gazed absently up at the torn battle-flags. “No doubt. But he’s a great spirit, none the less. He makes the rest of us look small, with our petty inabilities. No, it’s not sentimentalism,” he added. “I’ll see that he hangs fast enough.”

In the hall we found a group of men about one of the chairs before the hearth. And thus I came on the prisoner, Carl Ballion.

His hands were manacled, but otherwise there was little of the prisoner implied either in his attitude or in that of his guards. A streak of blood on his forehead was the only immediate trace he showed of the fight, and certainly among the rest of us he seemed the least concerned. I say “immediate trace,” because on looking again it became apparent that one leg was soaked with blood, and from the ugly angle in which he held it, was evidently broken. One divined, although not by any token of expression, that he must be suffering extreme pain. Otherwise, increased pallor gave an added refinement to the face which reposed on the chair cushions like an exquisitely carved mask.

But what was peculiarly impressive seemed to me the manner in which his recent opponents stood around him. As the unflinching eyes turned upon one or the other, the man in question looked away or shuffled uneasily. They gazed at him with a sort of mingled awe and fear, like people guarding a tethered lion, and by no means sure of themselves. As we came up, I heard one of them observe meekly, “That was a great fight you put up, Mr. Ballion.”

“Do you think so?” answered a clear voice. “Who has asked for your opinion?” And the bulky fellow cringed into silence, moving back a pace.

Then Ballion’s eyes fixed on us.

“Well,” he asked coldly, “did you enjoy the hunt?”

"You fought well," replied Norse, "if that's what you mean. You almost beat the lot of us—but not quite. We've come to see what can be done for you."

Ballion shook his head. "Nothing. I confess, though, I like your compliments. It softens the sting of losing, which was of course unpardonable. But I'm glad it was you, and not one of these"—a stare included us—"that brought me down. You're a man of courage and sense, the only admirable qualities. You fooled me into underestimating you. I was stupid enough to consider this fellow," he glanced at me, "a danger, rather than you. Ah, well!" And, shrugging his shoulders, "Before leaving, there's one thing I would like to learn—about Eleanor. Dead?"

"No," I retorted; "she will live in spite of your infamy."

"Faugh!" he exclaimed, "pietistic gabble! She belonged to me by every right, she broke faith and should have paid the price in simple justice. But as regards her at least, I had hoped that luck would favor me—I wasted a bullet on that pillar."

He raised his bound hands, pressing the backs of them to his lips in a gesture of chagrin, and I saw Francis Ballion's sapphire on his fingers.

"Infamy?" he repeated. "A word! I have not straddled between conventional rights and wrongs, but looked to myself. What use to life was Celia, whom I killed? She stood in my way, as did Francis. That confession of his almost fooled you, Norse. Ah, it took some persuasion before he signed." And pausing a moment, as if looking back, he added, "More than flesh and spirit could be thought to stand, he stood. I was proud of him—but he signed at last."

For one suffering intense pain, he showed a curious languor, almost drowsiness. His eyes closed a moment. And I grew conscious once more of that strange pressure round about, the insistent, diffused mentality that haunted Greyhouse. Once again it seemed to me as if all this had happened long ago, a scene reënacted from former life—this stately hall, the merciless, blood-stained man before us with his cynical valor. Curious odds and ends of thought, normally unfamiliar, drifted together. I remembered the torn pennons and armor, Ballion fighting alone in the darkness, his scornful, repeated cry. Was it not a time delusion? Was he not actually what in thought and bearing he resembled—an Italian *condottiere* of that Renaissance whose essence seemed alive in him and in this place?

I found his eyes fixed on me with a hard brilliance.

"A pity," he said, "that I miscalculated the drug that night when *you* sat here. Hasta's advice was right.

"I regret that I did not kill you and her. Otherwise at present my only feeling is indifference; a condemned man doesn't need to bother about others. Say I loved her beauty—say I needed her wealth—in any case a prize. I believed her superior to the soft nonsense of ethics, and thought her an ornament, a fine creature worth caring for, which is all you can expect in women. She turned out commonplace."

His head drooped, whether or not from weakness it was hard to tell, but he recovered himself. I saw that Norse was observing him sharply.

"You," he continued, eyeing me, "are a small good man, in spite of your lapses toward what you consider evil—you are one of the countless zeros that form the significance of modern culture. Live on with her and be happy in a smug, domestic nest. Perhaps you don't envy me—but on my word I don't envy you."

He dismissed and I believe forgot me with a change of glance. "Before I go, Norse, is there anything you'd like to ask me? I've nothing to conceal at present."

"We're in no hurry," said the other.

"Ah, but I think we are. I may not be so communicative later."

"Well then, how did you expect to carry out this last attempt without discovery?"

Ballion smiled faintly. "Their bodies, together with that of the chauffeur, would have been found in the car between here and town. Every sign of a hold-up and robbery. But I confess I didn't greatly care. I had nothing much to lose and wanted at least the pleasure of dealing with them."

"About Anne Roderick?"

A sudden tremor passed through Ballion; his head drooped again, and this time he was slow in raising it. His eyes wandered, as if he concentrated them with difficulty. "Anne Roderick," he repeated in a thick voice; "oh, a troublesome servant . . . I. . ."

Another tremor shook him. With an effort, he drew himself erect in the chair, and in a tone of bewilderment, "You asked—? I forget what was asked."

Norse was at his side. “What’s wrong? Is the pain so great? Ames, have a look at his wound.”

But for a moment Ballion roused himself. “My wound?” he said. “It’s not that. I have no pain—now. Did you really believe that you could produce me in some dingy court for boobies to stare at? Oh, no thank you. I preferred dying at Greyhouse. My ring’s the talisman. I merely waited to hear that some one. . . some one I hated was dead.”

Even before Norse’s finger had turned back the sapphire, disclosing a vacant cavity in the setting beneath, I had remembered Ballion’s gesture of hands raised to his lips.

“Quick!” Norse said to me, “there must be some form of antidote.”

It was, however, Ballion that answered. “Oh, none—none in the least. I should have been gone already. I kept myself here for the pleasure. . . for the pleasure of your company.”

He was like a man renouncing some frail support upon the surface of dark water. It was as if one could see oblivion close above him; but once again through vacancy filtered a brief ray: “Kinsman against kinsman, Francis said. . . we Baglioni . . . power, beauty, death, he said. . . an opened door? He was right. . . who knows. . .”

His eyes were lifted rigidly to something behind me. Turning, I saw only the poised falcon wrought in stone above the mantelpiece.

There came a whispering and movement. One or two of the men crossed themselves furtively. Norse, having leaned over him, drew back a step, and gazing at the pale, calm face expressed, I believe, what still echoed in the mind of us all, but with a deeper significance.

“There he is: Carl Ballion!”

Years afterward, in Ravenna, Eleanor and I came upon a tomb where, in effigy carved from a death mask, lies one of Cesare Borgia’s captains, serene and at peace. But in spite of its strange beauty, we both of us drew back in dread, and were haunted that day by the memory of another face it too closely resembled. For, shocking as it may be to moral preconceptions, not only the saints are gracious in death. Nay, I wonder at times what relation spirit and body have, or indeed whether an ardent flame, whatever its function, is not beautiful.

“Don’t count me absurd,” said Norse an hour later, “if I have the narrow door opened at his burial, and then closed henceforth, I hope always.

Superstitions are sometimes forgotten wisdom which, in this case, it would have aided us to heed.”

Chapter Seventeen

EPILOGUE

Several months intervened before an occasion arose where I had leisure to discuss at length with Norse the events here recorded. During that period Eleanor's condition, at first critical, had begun to mend, and at last, thanks to a naturally strong constitution, had entered upon permanent convalescence.

Her recovery, however, and our subsequent marriage for all their importance to Eleanor and myself, form no part of the history we have been considering. To return to the matter at issue, some two months after Carl Ballion's death, on an evening after dinner as I sat reviewing, idly enough, the day's affairs, my servant announced Captain Norse, and I rose eagerly to welcome the slight, somewhat jaunty figure that entered.

"There has evidently been no further question," I said, when he had taken a chair, "about your resigning from the service."

He smiled. "There never was any question. That was plain subterfuge, which requires an apology. I suppose you have often wondered why until the very last I gave no hint of suspecting Carl Ballion. The reasons for this were twofold. In the first place, as I remember telling you once, I had no proof, and therefore no right to cast a shadow on him at a critical point in his political career. But above all, I realized that if he were guilty, the single chance of pinning down such a man depended on making him believe me stupid and incompetent. This was so essential that I not only confided in no one, but let you take your chances at Greyhouse, and even prevailed on the Commissioner to make a pretense of dismissing me."

"Do you mind explaining," I asked, "how soon it was, in spite of Francis Ballion's confession, that you believed Carl guilty of the crime, and what proofs you had in the end that he was guilty?"

"No," answered Norse; "the starting point of it all was at the inquest, where I remembered a phrase you had quoted of Celia Ballion's, to the effect that she believed not in ghosts but in 'those who return.' The question presented itself as to what, providing she were not mad but sane, could have been her meaning. It was at first simply a whimsical speculation. But then I realized that her words might be taken as a fanciful theory to account for a good many detached phenomena in the case: the furnishings and architecture of the house, its singularly Old World atmosphere, the personality,

superstitions, and tastes of Mr. Ballion, the instrument used in committing the crime, and so on. Was it not to them she had reference as ‘those who return’? And assuming the possibility of some uncanny manifestation alien to normal experience, did it not explain numerous singularities of the problem?

“It was along the lines of this idea that I began to think. Heredity is simply a word for something we fail to understand, after all; but the name, Baglioni, supported such a view of the matter by lending it a kind of scientific sanction.

“Well then, admit some lingering survival, some telescoping of time, and that Francis Ballion, account for it as one might, exemplified the Renaissance—what was the essential characteristic of that epoch? And I considered it Individualism manifesting itself in every form of thought, therefore in essence opposed to conventional restraint, discipline or ideals—in a word, from the normal standpoint, lawless. But if lawless, then often unscrupulous, subtle, brilliant, daring.

“All this applied to and explained Francis Ballion; but I should have come no further, were it not that I was impressed by the physical resemblance between him and Carl.

“Moreover, I could not rid myself of the impression that in this case two and two did not make four. An unworn glove on Celia’s bed, the strangling thong laid out in full view by the driveway, foot-marks that were not Francis Ballion’s—this on one side, and then the confession itself, useless if he did not intend to commit suicide, but if he did, giving no clue as to why he escaped from Greyhouse for the purpose, at the risk of being stopped by Roose or Redsby and thus prevented from committing it at all. Yes, and that he was able to escape looked queer.

“I admit that chagrin made me obstinate; but at any rate I went over these points at the inquest with a growing sense that they did not fit anywhere, and the intention if possible of knowing why they did not. Besides, I could not forget Hasta’s expression as he stood at the door of Celia’s room. I’m sure you remember.

“Well, in this irritated, uneasy state, I went back to the library afterward with at least this much of definite in mind, that I was intrigued as to the whereabouts of Ballion’s gem collection, of which every one had heard. It was then, with no particular purpose, that I uncovered the rack and found the first actual clue.”

"You refer to what?" I asked.

"The moisture of the wrist straps."

At this point I interrupted him.

"It's a fact, then, that torture was used?"

"Unspeakable torture," replied Norse, "and not only the rack, as we discovered on exhuming the body, which as you know had been immured in the underground vault. Francis Ballion was broken inch by inch, and then dispatched when the confession had been obtained.

"But to return to my clue. Naturally enough, at first I could make nothing of it. I was even uncertain that it meant anything at all, and could not be sure until the following evening, when on examining it I found that the moisture had evaporated; but oil used to preserve the leather would not have evaporated. Then I knew. And I recalled that phrase you had quoted relative to the torture instruments as 'aids to eloquence.' But *if* the rack had been used, this could only have occurred during the preceding night, and there was but one person to whom torture could have been applied, for with the exception of Francis all others who had entered the room were present. Then I remembered those marks evidently made with a finger-nail on the paper which bore his signature.

"It was all a cobweb theory, but if assumed for the moment to be accurate, then Francis Ballion's body had not been removed from Greyhouse. Two police officers were outside, and it was therefore utterly impossible to have smuggled out a body. For a similar reason this body, admitting its existence, would be probably either in the library or in a hidden space adjoining it. And here was a supposition which might account for not finding the gem collection. You recall how I investigated the cellar, how I returned that night in search of plans of the house, and how everything was in vain because of the ingenuity used in taking the corner foundation of the house itself as an entrance to the underground passage.

"It was now that the *possibility* of Carl Ballion's guilt first dawned. He benefited by the death of his brother, and also indirectly by that of his sister-in-law. He knew of the strained relations between them and of the fears she expressed. It would not be impossible to fasten the guilt on Francis. It would not have been impossible for him to leave the Press Club dinner in time to commit the murder of Celia. It was he who had been closeted with his brother during that evening.

“And yet there were manifest difficulties in the way of such suspicion. First of all, the character he bore, and my own admiration for him. If this were discounted, there remained, of course, the difficulty he must anticipate in establishing Francis’s guilt, provided the latter could furnish an alibi, and there was every reason to believe he could, unless—and here an explanation occurred to me, not for the first time—unless Carl knew of something which would invalidate such an alibi.”

“But,” I interposed, “if he knew of Mrs. Starnforth—”

“I’m certain,” answered Norse, “that he did not. Otherwise he would have found means to silence her. I believe Francis Ballion had other and more questionable dulcineas in town, whose testimony, provided it could be obtained, would have prejudiced rather than helped his case. I believe Carl had reason to take these for granted; and I shouldn’t wonder if he tried to extort from his brother, vainly in this instance, his whereabouts of the preceding night.

“Aside from this, I had to ask myself why, if Francis were successfully implicated, was the law not allowed to take its course? Why commit a crime, go to extreme trouble in attaching the guilt elsewhere, succeed in doing so, and then after all throw your trouble into the discard for no reason?

“Stupidly enough, this objection confused me for some time, but when I finally saw a possible solution it did more than anything else thus far to make me distrustful of Carl Ballion. I remembered how, like a fool, I had revealed in detail to you and Carl my reasons for believing Francis innocent. One in my profession ought never to talk—but at that time who would have dreamed. . . Ames, when I consider the coolness of that man, I’m dazzled. Think, too, of his having had you invited to Greyhouse on the night of the crime, simply as an expert witness! At all events, I realize now that it was through my chattering he discovered a loophole for his brother’s escape, and took prompt action. You can imagine how that rankles, and always will.”

Norse stared for a moment absently beyond, and then, as one who shrugs off a useless regret, continued: “So far, however, it was simply theory; but following, for lack of better, my line of thought which had started at the inquest, I spent the day as you remember, in reading up on the Baglioni, and I kept stumbling on details that fitted themselves uncannily into my hypothesis: their physical strength, versatility, extravagance, intellectual keenness, lack of scruples—even such a feature as lightness of tread, which we had observed in the two brothers. I deciphered also, if you recall, those

apparently meaningless scratches on the signed confession, and connected them, rightly, but in vain, with the carved face of the Medusa. They were Francis Ballion's useless appeal for help.

"But it was not until night, on returning to Greyhouse, that my suspicions of Carl were given something more than fancy to build on. You may remember that I looked somewhat perturbed when you let me in. The point is, *I had seen him emerge from the narrow door, which had been closed behind him*. It was immediately after I had shown you my light, and was coming around to the door.

"Now I knew that Carl Ballion was ostensibly absent that night from Greyhouse. What was he doing here, then, at this hour, creeping out like a thief when the house was dark, and by so strange an exit? It seemed a reënactment of what might have occurred before. Then, as you know, there followed the discovery of Eleanor's blood-stained handkerchief."

"There's a point," I interrupted, "that I believe I can explain. Eleanor told me several days ago that she remembers giving Carl her handkerchief to keep for her on one occasion, as she had no pocket. Doubtless he found it in his coat and used it without thinking."

"Yes," agreed Norse. "I understood it in about that way later."

"But what," I asked, "*was* he doing there, if the crime had been committed the day before?"

"Obviously finishing his crime; but as to what actually went on, we shall never know. It's impossible to determine just when Francis Ballion died. You remember that Miss Graham was frightened during the previous night by sounds that recalled the moan of the wind, though no air was stirring. I think it possible that these were his cries after he had been dragged to the underground room, and that the sound was carried up along the corner support of the house.

"It was from this time on that I definitely suspected Carl Ballion, and every ensuing event confirmed it—Hasta's behavior with you, the dried leather of the rack, the discovery of a body in Francis Ballion's clothes, yet indicating a form of suicide that struck me as peculiar and farfetched. Then came the letter from Mrs. Starnforth, establishing her lover's innocence. The gem collection remained lost, but an item of it was put into the market surreptitiously. I discovered that Carl had debts, and I knew of the difficulty in settling the two estates. This, in connection with the incident of your car, formed my strongest evidence."

"How so?" I asked.

"Because it confirmed what I already feared when I first warned you that night at Greyhouse. Carl Ballion, struck by your encounter with Hasta, would consider you a possible spy, which was bad enough—but above all, he could not afford any shadow of rivalry. You don't realize yet, that he *had* to marry Eleanor Graham. Nothing remained of his brother's estate except what would have had to be repaid to her. If this marriage failed, his crimes would have been useless; because, after all, it was the need of money, the bait of its contingent power, that tempted him—though doubtless he loved her also in his fashion.

"And yet observe that I still had no proof—nothing that could be put before a jury as counterpoise to Francis's signed admission of guilt and the finding of a body which I could not deny was his. I had nothing tangible, not even a motive for arresting Hasta, who I felt certain was guilty.

"But at last I found what I wanted. Surely, unless everything I believed of him was false, then he must be in control of other scoundrels than Hasta. The tampering with your car showed that, as well as the supposed body of Francis. And so it proved. A connection was established between him and certain characters of the underworld. These were arrested; but it is significant of the loyalty he inspired that we could get nothing out of them until after his death. This was not all. On the evening before your last invitation to Greyhouse I succeeded, not for the first time, I confess, in entering his apartment while he was absent, and discovered at length the famous black felt hat of the shadow seen by Miss Graham. It was in the same wardrobe as a pair of rubber-soled shoes that fitted exactly the tracings taken by Roose after Celia's murder, and to which there still adhered particles of the red gravel used on the driveway at Greyhouse.

"I had decided on his arrest the very day of your call. And knowing what I did, you can imagine my distress at the news that he had once more outwitted me. Because, as regards the inventory, one had already been taken."

"Did you ever learn," I queried, "as to where the body came from which was passed off as Francis Ballion's?"

"Yes. On the confession of the men we arrested, it appears to have been a clever grave robbery. I don't think it was anything worse."

"And Anne Roderick?"

"That," declared Norse, "is a mystery, and we'll never know the exact truth. What I think likely is that, as she opposed Eleanor's marriage with him, Carl was prepared to remove even so slight an obstacle. Knowing her condition, he relied in killing her on the appearance at her window of a face she would consider Francis Ballion's. Certainly it's a theory that explains the facts, and we know besides that he was in Greyhouse during the night of your attempted poisoning."

"One last point," I said; "why did you warn me against Eleanor Graham?"

"I've given you the principal reason," he answered, "which was my fear of Carl's attitude toward a rival. But, perhaps you can explain something to me. An attempt was made on you in connection with your car. I did my best to persuade you to leave town or at least Greyhouse, and I believed you in extreme danger. Then two weeks passed without anything happening until the night when you were nearly killed by poison. I don't understand why Carl Ballion let so much time elapse, or having done so, why he acted at all."

Norse's account had cleared up a good many things, and I described the interchange that Ballion and I had had in front of the Door of Death, when, as it might have appeared, I had been examining the Medusa's face.

"Yes," agreed Norse; "you were getting too near the vulnerable point. That explains it.

"How shall we consider Carl and Francis Ballion?" he went on—"as singular examples of heredity? as actual reincarnations of a family type? as phantoms of another time? We can only wonder. But I remember telling you once that I believed in the possibility of a person behind and unknown, who was the one actually guilty. And I believe so still. Let us call it, rather, a personality. Carl Ballion and Francis were, after all, puppets of a greater will, namely, their age, which in a curious projection of the past lingered in Greyhouse. And we are likewise the puppets of ours. And in the light of our age we are judged."

Years have passed since then. But oddly enough, Eleanor has never brought herself to dispose of Greyhouse. It stands lofty and beautiful as ever, and untouched, though closed for the most part. Sometimes we return for a day to wander through its splendid rooms and feel once more its strange power. And the belief grows in me, because it is so well built and

magnificently adorned, with much worth treasuring, that our children and grandchildren will preserve it and return also to wonder at it from time to time; though of course to live there is out of the question.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

Inconsistency in accents has been corrected or standardised.

When nested quoting was encountered, nested double quotes were changed to single quotes.

Space between paragraphs varied greatly. The thought-breaks which have been inserted attempt to agree with the larger paragraph spacing, but it is quite possible that this was simply the methodology used by the typesetter, and that there should be no thought-breaks.

[The end of *The Door of Death* by Samuel Shellabarger (as John Esteven)]