

The Unfinished Crime

by Elisabeth Sanxay Holding

* A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook *

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please check with a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **If the book is under copyright in your country, do not download or redistribute this file.**

Title: The Unfinished Crime

Date of first publication: 1940

Author: Elisabeth Sanxay Holding

Date first posted: Oct. 6, 2022

Date last updated: Oct. 19, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20221017

This eBook was produced by: Chuck Greif & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>



Chapter I, II, III, IV, V, VI, VII,
VIII, IX, X, XI, XII, XIII, XIV,
XV, XVI, XVII, XVIII, XIX, XX,
XXI, XXII, XXIII, XXIV, XXV,
XXVI.

Typographical errors have been
corrected; [a list follows the text](#).

(etext transcriber's note)

The Unfinished Crime

by Elisabeth Sanxay Holding

To
Elizabeth Sherman

CHAPTER I

Branscombe lit a cigarette and pushed back his coffee cup, with a look of annoyance on his haughty face.

“Isn’t the coffee good, Andrew?” asked his sister, anxiously.

“Fair,” he answered, and that worried her. It was quite possible that he was very much affronted by the coffee, or by something else on the table, and if it were so, he would keep quiet about it for a day or two and then bring up the subject when she least expected it.

It was not the breakfast that displeased him, though; it was some dissatisfaction so obscure that he could not have named it. His health was good, his financial position was sound, his love affair was progressing well. Mrs. Patrell liked him; he knew she liked him. He had seen no rivals, had never heard her talk of any other man; he felt almost certain that she would marry him if he asked her. Only, he could not make up his mind to ask her; he hated to ask anyone for anything.

He rose and walked over to the window, a tall young man of thirty, lean, correct, with an air of distinction about him; grey eyes and black hair, with the high-bridged Branscombe nose—a handsome man in an aloof and chilly fashion. His sister sat looking at him and she wanted to laugh.

It sometimes seemed to her that the laughter within her was like a living thing that fluttered. She wouldn’t really have laughed at Andrew; she loved him and admired him. She knew how seriously he took the Mrs. Patrell affair. But it was difficult for her to be serious about anything. She was a slight, pretty, fair-haired girl of twenty-three. She was by

nature careless and absent-minded and gay, and it was a strain to live up to Andrew's standards. She failed very often.

"Mrs. Patrell wouldn't," she thought. "She is really the perfect wife for Andrew.... Of course she must be a good deal older than he, but she doesn't look it. And it doesn't matter. Somehow, Andrew isn't young."

"Are you going to drive in to market, Eva?" he asked.

She understood the implications of that question because she knew Andrew so well. He wanted the car himself and at the same time he wanted Eva to go to market and be intelligent and economical about the housekeeping.

"Well, I think I'll walk," she said, for that was what he wanted her to say. He was silent for a moment.

"In that case," he said, "I think I'll take the car." And off he went.

Eva finished her coffee and lit a cigarette. She did not want to walk into town this hot morning. It was a mile and a half each way, along a flat, uninteresting road.

"I'll say I had a headache," she told herself.

Andrew never questioned headaches and that made her feel guilty, and a little mean. She had a clear enough vision of her brother's weaknesses, but they aroused no resentment in her gentle and tolerant heart. She was very fond of him and very sure of his affection for her. Only she wished she could get away from him sometimes, even for a week. She wished every day of her life that she had just a little money of her own.

Andrew always gave her money, when she needed it; the trouble was that she had to convince him that she did need it. He admitted the necessity for fairly expensive clothes. He

scorned anything cheap, but he also hated waste and extravagance and she had long ago made up her mind that she did not.

“If I had money of my own,” she thought, “I’d like to waste it. Now, let’s see about these boring meals.... Tomorrow’s liver, isn’t it?”

Twice a week Andrew wanted calf’s liver for breakfast, and she had to eat it, too, as a precaution against anaemia. She rose with a sigh and went into the kitchen where the cook and the house-maid sat at breakfast. The sun was shining in; the table was covered with a clean white cloth, and set out with a cheerful assortment of china which did not match. There was a nice little bouquet of sweet peas in a glass, and a large enamel coffee pot. The two women rose as she entered, and she felt apologetic at disturbing them and faintly envious. The house-maid was young; she went to dances and the movies with her boy-friend; she had a good time.

“And I *never* do,” she thought.

It might be her own fault; sometimes she thought it must be. She made friends with people, but Andrew always said they were unsuitable people; when they travelled he was severe about chance acquaintances, and she had grown a little nervous. When he had taken this house in Connecticut for the summer, he had told Eva it was a nice neighbourhood, and according to her temperament she had felt hopeful. But not after she had been here two days. It was a summer colony of sedate and comfortable houses with a casino and beach, and it was inhabited by young couples with small children and middle-aged couples who played bridge. There was only one unattached young man, and Andrew didn’t like him. And

Eva did not quite know whether she herself liked Llewellyn Evans or not. He was good-looking, he was polite, but she found him faintly irritating with his impersonal courtesy.

“I’ve got the list all written down, Miss Eva,” said the cook, “if you’ll be wanting me to ’phone in for it.”

She wanted to get rid of Eva, naturally, so that they could resume their breakfast, and Eva was glad enough to leave this uninteresting matter in the cook’s competent hands. She wandered back to the dining-room and stood by the window, burdened with a familiar feeling of restlessness and vague guilt.

“I oughtn’t to leave everything to the servants,” she thought. “I ought to bustle around and superintend things.”

Andrew was always occupied. He was making a study of the eighteenth century in England, he read a great deal, and he was writing a book. He told her often that she ought to keep up her French, ought to practice on the piano, or take more exercise. She felt sure that his advice was valuable; yet she never did these things. The days were so long....

Llewellyn Evans had come out of the house next door, where he was visiting his sister and her husband, and Eva watched him critically. He was carrying a book, and that meant he was coming here. He was always borrowing books from Andrew, and always returning them when Andrew was not at home. It couldn’t be a coincidence, yet he never would say that he came to see Eva.

“Something secretive in the fellow,” Andrew had said.

And as she watched him, Eva was inclined to agree with that. He walked lightly and swiftly; he was slim and neat and

very dark; with his olive skin, his pointed dark brows, his sudden and rare smile, he had somehow a foreign look.

But he was not a foreigner, nor was he so interesting as he looked. He was a born New Yorker, an accountant spending a long summer holiday here. He had a serious interest in tennis, he was a masterly swimmer, but in the art of conversation he did not excel. He was extraordinarily quiet, not because he was embarrassed or constrained, but as if he did not choose to communicate his thoughts. He had never asked Eva to any of the dances at the Casino, never asked her to come out in his car.

This morning it was as usual. The bell rang; she heard the house-maid go along the hall to open the door.

“Mr. Branscombe in?”

“No, sir. He’s gone out.”

“Is Miss Branscombe at home, then?”

“I’ll see, sir.”

Miss Branscombe was at home, and Mr. Evans entered the cheerful little drawing-room.

“Good morning, Miss Branscombe,” he said.

A sudden rebellion swept over her. She did not want to be Andrew’s sister, Miss Branscombe. She did not want to sit here and chat aimlessly with young Evans for half an hour, and then be left to her empty day. She wanted to shock and startle him.

“Another of these darn books?” she said. And was horrified at herself.

But Evans apparently took the remark as a matter of course.

“It seems like a good excuse,” he said, quite unruffled. “I never read ’em, you know.”

It was as if with these two sentences they had established a curious intimacy.

“Then why do you bother with them?” she asked.

They were both still standing. He gave her a quick, narrow glance, and smiled.

“I’m afraid I’ve got to have an excuse,” he said. “Your brother doesn’t like me.”

This frankness confused and troubled her.

“Andrew’s very reserved,” she said.

“No,” said Evans, smiling again. “My people were Welsh, you know, and I’ve got second sight. I know he doesn’t like me.”

“If it’s just one of those ‘feelings’ about people,” she said, “I’ve had them lots of times, and they’ve always been wrong.”

“No,” he said again, but not smiling now. “You wouldn’t know.”

She looked at him, and found his narrow dark eyes regarding her steadily.

“You’d just be kind,” he went on. “You could be with a person day after day, and not see....”

His unwavering glance, his words, disconcerted her.

“That doesn’t sound very flattering ...” she said. “Just stupidity?”

“You’re not stupid,” he said. “Only kind. Only so charitable that you couldn’t see the ugly things.”

“Do you?”

“I do,” he said.

She wanted to take that lightly, wanted to laugh; and she could not. He was still smiling, but it was a smile that increased her uneasiness, for it did not touch his eyes.

“I don’t like you to stand there reading my character,” she said, almost petulantly.

“I wasn’t. I came to ask you if you’d come to the Country Club for lunch. We’re playing the semi-final doubles this morning....”

It was the first invitation he had ever given her and she was surprised at her great desire to accept it. But Andrew was very much opposed to the Country Club and its members. Too much drinking went on there, he said, and worse. She could imagine his chilly displeasure when she came home. He would be offended for days.

“Of course you’re free to do as you please,” he would say. “You’re not in any way obliged to take my advice or to pay any attention to my wishes.”

It wasn’t worth it.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “but I can’t very well....”

“I wish you’d come. I want very much to talk to you.”

“You can talk here.”

“Not in this house.”

“It’s a rather nice little house,” she said. “Are you having an attack of second sight about it, and seeing sinister things here?”

Then she wished she had not said that. She knew that he did not like this house, and she knew why. It was because it was Andrew’s house, and he didn’t like Andrew. An almost fierce loyalty came over her. She loved Andrew.

“Stop in on your way home and tell me how you came out in the semi-finals,” she said, and held out her hand with an agreeable smile.

It was a very definite dismissal, and he accepted it, but with no appearance of disappointment or resentment.

“But you can’t tell, with him,” she thought. “You can’t tell what he’s really thinking.... I think Andrew was right about his being secretive.”

Well, he was gone, and it was not likely that he would return.

“Who cares?” she asked herself.

But somehow she did care, somehow a miserable loneliness came over her. Andrew had no friends, and would never allow her to make any. It could not be that everyone they met everywhere was unsuitable. It must be that Andrew was too difficult to please.

Would it go on like this, she thought? She and Andrew isolated from the rest of the world.... She went out on the veranda, stood looking out over the neat lawn bordered by a privet hedge. Everything in her life was neat and orderly, and hedged in....

“I hope Andrew will marry his Mrs. Patrell!” she cried to herself. “I *wish* something would happen to him, to make him more human.”

CHAPTER II

Branscombe, driving along the country roads at his usual moderate speed, was not pleased with himself. He was vaguely and uncomfortably aware that he was not sufficiently "human," and never had been. His father and his grandfather had been owners of a prosperous factory in a little town up the Hudson. The Branscombe house had been the largest and finest in the town. The Branscombes had been cultured and civilized people living among barbarians; they had had a library, they travelled. Andrew had grown up with the idea that the Branscombes were superior to other people. He had taken that idea to boarding-school with him, and it had not made him popular.

He had never been popular anywhere, never easy, and never happy. He had always been stiff, formal, over-fastidious. While he was in college his father had died, leaving everything to his son, with the verbal request that he look after Eva. Andrew had sold the factory, which he knew he could not run. He had taken Eva to Europe to the correct places, he had seen that she went to one of the right schools. He had looked after Eva.

As far as he could see, he neglected no duty. It was not necessary for him to earn money, and he had devoted himself to scholarly pursuits and to his writing. He took that very seriously; he read, he wrote, he took sufficient exercise. It was a good life; he could imagine no other that would suit him half so well, and if he married Hilda Patrell, he did not intend to change it. She would be in it—that was all.

She had been lunching with a middle-aged couple who lived near him, a couple of whom he approved, and they had

introduced him to her on the beach. He had been curiously interested in her, but he had mistrusted his emotion until Mrs. Carroll had talked to him later.

“We’re so fond of Hilda,” she had said. “She’s so splendid. Her marriage was most unfortunate, but it hasn’t embittered her.... She’s come back here to live in the house where she was born.... One of the fine old families.... Everyone has the *greatest* respect for her.”

Then he knew that his admiration for her was right; he had gone to call upon her, and she had been so cordial he had gone again and again, and never in his life had he enjoyed anything as he had these visits. She was a wonderful hostess; she created an atmosphere that enchanted him. Once they were married that, of course, would be changed. He would no longer be a guest who would come and be happy for a time, and then return to his own house, his own room, his own ways. He would not care to live in Hilda’s house. There were many complications. There was Hilda’s daughter, and there was Eva. The old Branscombe house on the Hudson had been sold. Perhaps the best thing would be an apartment in town for the winter, and a good boarding-school for the child....

Perhaps that would not suit Hilda. She was unfailingly kind and friendly, yet she was, in her way, mysterious. He wished that he could talk to her about living arrangements before he asked her to marry him. He wished, indeed, that he need never ask her in so many words. There was something humiliating about it.

He was not going to ask her now, however. He had known her only two months. They could go on in this happy, tranquil way for weeks. Turning a corner he came in sight of

her house, a square, old-fashioned wooden house in a well-kept garden surrounded by a picket fence. It was not really beautiful at all, or impressive, but it had its dignity, its serenity, it had so great a charm for him. Hilda herself was standing on the veranda speaking to the gardener, and his heart leaped to see her.

He knew that she must be older than he, for her daughter was thirteen, but she didn't look it. She was a woman of medium height, slender, but sturdily built, with broad shoulders and a straight back. Her skin was sunburned to a warm gold colour; her eyes were as blue as cornflowers; she had thick, fine, blonde hair, which she wore brushed back from her forehead and knotted at the nape of her neck. He admitted that she had no style, but he found her way of dressing singularly attractive. This morning she wore a sleeveless yellow linen frock, and he thought she was lovely. There was, he thought, something virginal about her, so that he could easily forget she had ever been married. Her child in no way detracted from this impression. Coralie was a curiously detached creature, free and elusive as a nymph. At heart, Branscombe was a little afraid of her, but she remained entirely in the background, and he could forget her, too.

Hilda Patrell looked up at the sound of his car.

“How nice to see you!” she said.

As he mounted the steps of the veranda, he felt again the warm, serene happiness he felt only with her. She always put him at his ease, banished his chilly constraint.

“I thought I'd stop by and see if there were any errands I could do for you in the village,” he said.

He knew he had said this too often; she must long ago have seen through the flimsy pretext. But it was part of her

charm that she would not be amused, or challenging, but would accept his words with polite seriousness.

“Thanks very much,” she said, “but there’s really nothing. Sit down for a while, won’t you?”

It was wonderful here, it was perfect. The gardener was trimming the privet hedge; his shears made a crisp and pleasant sound in the quiet morning. The street before him, lined with old elms, was quiet; he knew that the house behind them was in exquisite order. They sat here together, this friendly, charming woman and himself; he did not need to make any effort; she would begin just the right sort of conversation.

But, unaccountably, she did not begin a conversation. She said nothing, and the silence became awkward. He glanced at her, and he saw a very strange look in her face; her blue eyes gazed past him; she was ignoring him. This disturbed him.

“Are you ...? Were you busy, Mrs. Patrell?” he asked.

Then she looked at him, a long and steady glance, as if she was trying to read his face.

“I had a letter yesterday that upset me ...” she said. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Money,” he thought. “She’s in some sort of financial difficulty.”

She would want to borrow money. The idea caused a sort of panic in him; so many people wanted his money: poor relations, collectors for charities, people with marvellous schemes, people who said they needed help.

“I can’t ...” he thought.

Then he looked at her grave and gentle face, and he was overwhelmed by tenderness. He was willing to lend her

money. He would give her money. Rising, he went to her side, and laid his hand on her shoulder. He had meant it to be a gesture of honest friendliness, but it became something more. A delicate fragrance rose from her hair; he glanced down at her firm, slender neck, and his grasp tightened a little. She turned and looked up into his face, her blue eyes misty.

“I had a letter from my husband ...” she said. “He says he intends to see Coralie often. He says he can easily find out where she goes, and that he’ll meet her in the street, in shops....”

Branscombe listened, shocked.

“I’m sure something can be done,” he said. “A lawyer—”

“I couldn’t! I couldn’t have Charles arrested or threatened, for speaking to his own child. I couldn’t let such a thing be brought into court.”

That was understandable.

“If you speak to Coralie,” he said, “if you make her realize how much it would distress you for her—”

She shook her head, and he was dismayed to see tears well up in her eyes.

“You don’t know Charles,” she said. “Coralie’s really devoted to me, but she’s so young.... And Charles has very great personal charm....”

A dull resentment filled Branscombe. He did not wish to hear any more about this man who had been her husband. “It’s in very poor taste ...” he thought. “She might understand how I feel....”

“Ever since I got that letter,” she went on, “I’ve been thinking and thinking. Only it hasn’t been real thinking....”

When it's a question of Coralie, I'm not logical.... She means so much to me—too much, perhaps....”

Branscombe stood beside her, sullen and miserable. He was nothing to Hilda Patrell. She had this life of her own, made up of her love for her child, and Heaven knew what memories of her husband.

“I'm sorry,” he said, stiffly.

“I can't think for myself about Coralie,” she said, unsteadily, “that's why I've told you. Ever since I left Charles, ten years ago, I've lived so very much alone.... I was afraid to make friends ... only when I met you ... I knew I could trust you. I knew you were honourable and kind and understanding.”

“Did you really feel like that?” he cried. He was delighted, but at the same time he was surprised, for that was not his own idea of himself. He had a mental image of an Andrew Branscombe who was austere and inflexible, certainly honourable and just, but too aloof to be described as “kind and understanding.” When she said it, though, he believed it. He believed that she alone had read his heart.

“Hilda ...” he said. “My dear girl....”

“Do you think,” she asked, “that I ought to let Charles see Coralie, even if it should mean that ... that she might turn away from me?”

“No!” he answered. “No, I don't.... Hilda.... There's only one solution. Marry me at once, and we'll take the child away with us until—”

“Marry you?” she said, staring at him.

He looked back at her, in growing consternation.

“You must have guessed,” he said. “I’ve come here, almost every day—”

“But I’m married to Charles!”

“You’re not divorced?”

“No. It’s only a separation. I never even thought about a divorce.”

She must have seen in his face what she was doing to him, for her glance grew soft.

“I’m so sorry ... so very sorry, Andrew ... I didn’t realise ... I was so happy to have you for my friend. I took it for granted that you knew I wasn’t free.”

“Do you love him?”

She was silent for a moment.

“No,” she said, “not any more.”

He was profoundly impressed by her integrity, her moral courage. He looked and looked at her downcast face, and he wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her.

“Hilda ...” he said, “I’ll do anything I can for you, dear.”

She tried to smile. And suddenly it occurred to him that he was in love with a married woman. That was a thing he had always condemned without mercy, and he condemned it in himself. Yet it gave him a strange thrill of exultation.

CHAPTER III

He did not wish to suspect how he felt. He did not quite know himself how he felt. He was greatly agitated, but he was not sure whether this confused emotion was wholly distressing....

“I can’t think it out,” she said. “If I should have an open break with Charles, it might upset Coralie.... Girls at that age are so sensitive....”

It was her child she was speaking of, thinking of, not him. She had already put aside his love, his offer of marriage, as things of minor importance. He was sullenly angry at her for that, and yet he still wanted to kiss her.

“She’s going to lunch with the Richman girl.... I don’t see how I can tell her not to go. I can’t keep her shut up.... But I don’t want her to see Charles until I’ve thought it all out....”

“I’ll drive her to the Richmans’.”

“You will, Andrew?”

“Yes and bring her home,” he said.

He did not want to talk about this child any longer; he wished, indeed, that he could get away and be alone for a time to think over this thing that had happened to him. It was, of course, impossible. He had to remain, had to feign a serious interest in the problem.

“Will you come back to lunch with me, Andrew?” she asked. “If I can talk it over with you....”

He accepted somewhat formally, and he was not sorry that Coralie came out of the house just then. She was an extraordinarily handsome child, or girl, or whatever one should call her; she was tall and straight and slim with fair

hair and steady brown eyes. She had an air of being completely independent, of living in some world of her own. She was polite enough, yet Branscombe felt that there was nothing respectful about her.

“May I drive a little way, Mr. Branscombe?” she asked, as they set off.

“This is a very powerful engine—”

“A boy I know has a car like this, and he lets me drive.”

Branscombe wanted to refuse. He did not like anyone else to drive his car. But when they came to a long, straight stretch of road she asked him again, and he very reluctantly changed places with her.

“Only a little way,” he said.

He watched her, her little sunburned hands steady on the wheel, her eyes intent on the road. She was handsome, but she was, he thought, entirely lacking in the soft, shy charm of a young girl. Was she like Patrell?... He refused to think of that.

At the next corner she stopped the car neatly.

“That’s right,” said Branscombe. “Rather a bad turn here. I’ll take the wheel now, Coralie.”

She jumped out, but instead of coming round to the other side of the car, as he expected, she stood still.

“Thanks ever so much, Mr. Branscombe, for bringing me this far. I think I’ll take the short cut through the woods here.”

“No!” he said, briefly. “I told your mother I’d take you to your friend’s house.”

“Mother doesn’t mind my taking the short cut, Mr. Branscombe. I’ve done it hundreds of times.”

“Well, not to-day,” he said.

“I want to, thanks,” she said. “I like it.”

“Not to-day,” he repeated, well aware that his tone of authority was not impressing her. “Get back into the car, please!”

“No, thanks,” she answered, and turned away.

“Coralie!” he called. “Come back! I can’t allow this!”

She looked at him with surprise, and a sort of compassion, as if his imperative manner was somehow pathetic.

“I’d *rather* go this way, thanks, Mr. Branscombe,” she said, and started off, her hair bright in the sun.

Hilda trusted him not to let the child out of his sight, and no matter how ridiculous he might appear, no matter how much he resented the situation, he would keep faith with her. He drove the car on to the grass at the edge of the road and locked it. When he had done this, the child was out of sight.

He stepped into the little wood. There was a faint path there and he followed it, walking rapidly. He was in a towering rage. Not since he could remember had anyone so flouted him. He was accustomed to respect, from tradespeople, from servants. Eva sometimes argued with him, but she never disregarded his wishes with the cool impudence shown by this chit of a girl.

“I’ve got to control myself ...” he thought.

He must not say anything to the child, must not let her see how angry he was. He would have to persuade her to return to the car, or, if that failed he would have to walk with her to her friend’s house, and that would be almost unbearable.

“Damned brat!” he said to himself.

It was strange that he caught no glimpse of the child's white dress. She must have run, to get so far ahead of him. He would not call her, though. He quickened his pace, and in a few moments he could see the meadow that lay on the farther side of the wood. Except for three cows grazing there, it was empty.

It was not possible that she could have run fast enough to cover that wide meadow and be out of sight in this space of time. She must have taken some other path. He stopped irresolute; he went back a few steps. And then he heard her voice.

“But I don't care what other people say, dear!”

Her voice was clear and light. The voice that answered her was no more than a murmur, but unmistakably a man's.

“Patrell!” thought Branscombe.

He felt certain that Coralie had met her father, and that the meeting had been prearranged.

“The child's simply made a fool of me ...” he thought.

It was certainly not his habit to act upon impulse; he was disposed to be over-deliberate. But this morning he was not his usual self. His talk with Hilda had profoundly upset him, and following that had come his anger against Coralie. He was not accustomed to emotional disturbances: for years his life had been orderly and quiet; even his love for Hilda been a tranquil enough thing. Now, however, he was so thoroughly disturbed that he went after Coralie without hesitation, and he went in a rage.

He had no trouble in finding her. She was in a little clearing, a few feet from the path, sitting on a fallen log, beside a man; a very handsome man, tall, slender, and easy,

with a bold nose, black hair, dark blue eyes half-insolent and half-tender. And he was more than handsome; he had that bearing, that careless grace about him that Branscombe envied above all qualities. There had been boys in school with this nonchalance, and he, stiff, aloof, always suspicious of insult, had envied them. This was the kind of man women liked, and loved, and Branscombe hated him.

Hatred was a curious thing, that gave him energy, that warmed his heart. He stepped into the clearing and confronted Patrell.

“I’m in charge of this child, by her mother’s authority,” he said. “She’s to come with me at once.”

Patrell rose, and regarded him with surprise and amusement.

“I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure of meeting you before,” he said. “Perhaps Coralie can introduce you.”

The child had grown very pale, but she did not lose her remarkable, to Branscombe, her unhuman self-control.

“It’s Mr. Branscombe, Daddy,” she said.

“He’s in charge of you?”

“No,” she said. “Mother just said he’d drive me over to Lucy’s. He hasn’t any right to try to order me around.”

“No,” said Patrell. “I don’t think he has, Coralie.”

He put his arm about the child’s shoulders; they smiled at each other. And Branscombe felt certain that Patrell would win the child away from her mother; he felt that Patrell was superior to himself in worldly wisdom, in boldness, in vigour, and in charm. But Patrell was bad and he was good. He saw it as simply as that. It was evil opposed to good. An

idea came to him which was entirely opposed to his usual mode of thought.

“I deal with people frankly,” he often said. “I don’t pretend to be subtle.”

Yet now, without the least effort, he had somehow analysed Patrell, and somehow knew the one way to approach him.

“I intended to write to you,” he said, “about a certain financial arrangement....”

He was right. Patrell was immediately interested, although he tried not to show it.

“Sorry,” he said, “but I’m not very enthusiastic about financial arrangements with strangers.”

“I think this arrangement will appeal to you,” said Branscombe.

“Well.... You might give me some idea....”

“Impossible—in the circumstances,” said Branscombe. “Never mind. Perhaps it’s just as well. I’d better think things over for a few weeks.”

He could not have explained how he knew that the well-dressed, assured Patrell was always hard-up, always in a hurry for money, but he did know it.

“I may as well hear what you have to say,” said Patrell, with amiable condescension. “I happen to have a few moments to spare. Coralie, sweetheart, run along, will you?”

“Shall I wait for you, Daddy, by the road?”

Patrell smiled at her. He knew his power over the child; he must see that she was troubled, worried, close to tears, but he did not bother to reassure her.

“No,” he answered. “I’ll see you again soon, sweetheart. Run along to your friend’s now, and have a good time.”

She waited a moment, looking into her father’s face. But Patrell was not interested in her now.

“Run along, Coralie!” he said.

The two men were silent for a time after she had gone. Patrell stepped out on the path and looked after her. She was crossing the meadow, walking with a sort of proud unconcern, straight as an arrow, curiously touching in her slender immaturity.

“Well?” asked Patrell, turning to Branscombe.

“How much will you take to get out and stay out?” asked Branscombe.

He was surprised by his own words, his manner, and he was proud of them. He was proud of the hate and contempt he felt for this man. He discovered that hatred was a very different thing from the flustered irritability he had formerly called anger. Hatred fortified him wonderfully, made him fearless and resourceful.

Patrell lit a cigarette.

“That,” he said, “would come pretty high. I don’t think you could afford it, Branscombe. You’ve only got about twenty thousand a year.”

“How do you know that?” cried Branscombe, in a panic.

There was nothing he disliked more than for anyone to know about his financial position. Even his sister knew nothing. Not that there was anything whatever to conceal; his affairs were in the most perfect order. But he didn’t like anyone to know.

“Oh ...!” said Patrell. “I thought I was justified in making some enquiries about you when I heard that you were making love to my wife.”

For the first time in his life, Branscombe hit a man. He hit in a blind passion, and it was sheer luck that the blow caught Patrell on the chin, and sent him crashing to the ground. Branscombe stood looking down at him in a sort of ecstasy; the blood ran hot in his veins, he felt himself strong, triumphant.

“You swine!” he cried. “You swine!”

Patrell, lying flat, with his eyes closed, groaned and stirred. And Branscombe began to think. Patrell was only knocked out; when he came to, he would probably attack his assailant.

“Very well,” thought Branscombe. “I can defend myself.”

But he was not so sure of that. And he thought it very unlikely that he could ever knock Patrell down again, now that he would be on his guard.

Patrell struggled up on one elbow; his eyes were blank and dazed, his mouth was set in a vicious line.

“Damn you!” he said. “You wait ...!”

He was on his knees now. A great terror seized Branscombe; he struck again, and Patrell fell back. But he was not unconscious. He was struggling up once more. There was a horrible look in his eyes.

“No ...!” cried Branscombe.

Patrell stood up. Blood was trickling down his face; he shook his head, like a wounded animal; he was dangerous and horrible. Branscombe backed away from him. But he could not turn, leaving that menace behind him.

“You cursed fool!” cried Patrell, in a sort of furious amazement.

Branscombe hit him again. But he only swayed. A blow on the chest sent him down again. He lay on his back, panting; his face was a queer colour, his eyes were glazed.

Terror and rage overwhelmed Branscombe. He could not leave this horrible, bloody, panting thing.... It had to be finished, in desperate haste. There was not a stone, not a stick, not a weapon in sight. He pulled off his coat and threw it over Patrell’s head, pulled it tight over his face. And Patrell struggled....

Branscombe hit him on the temple and then he was still. Branscombe rose to his feet, with a gasp like a sob.... The thing with its head covered was moving again. It was like a nightmare. Suppose it got up, like that....

He kicked it, in the ribs. And it moved no more.

CHAPTER IV

He was sick; he was shaking violently; he leaned against a tree, fighting against the waves of nausea that swept over him.

“I’ve got to control myself,” he thought. “I’ve got to get away...” He tried to take a step, but his knees trembled; he leaned back against the tree.

“And I can’t go without my coat,” he thought.

He did not know how he could retrieve his coat. Take it off Patrell’s face—see Patrell’s face ...?

“No ...” he thought. “No ... I’ll drive to one of the towns near here, and buy another coat...”

But if he were to meet someone who knew him? The spectacle of Andrew Branscombe, so invariably correct, driving his handsome car, coatless, would be altogether too striking.

“And Eva would notice, if I had a new coat. She’d want to know what had happened to the old one.”

He shivered, but he was growing a little more composed. He saw that he would have to get his coat and put it on.

“But if it’s—stained ...?” he thought, and shivered again. If the lining of the coat were stained with blood, he would do something about it later, after he had got away.

Go away, leaving Patrell here?

“Yes!” he cried to himself. “Certainly! Nobody can possibly know.... No one would ever think such a thing of me.” It wasn’t true, either. Somehow, what had happened was not his fault. Everyone would understand that. He was not the sort of man who did a thing like this.

“Nobody will connect me with it,” he thought.

And suddenly he remembered Coralie.

She knew that he had been here with her father; she had left them alone together. If Patrell were found here, dead.... If? There was no “if” about it. He would inevitably be found. Someone might come now.

“O God!” cried Branscombe.

If someone were to come along the path now, and see Patrell lying there, and Branscombe standing by him.... Anyone seeing that would think Branscombe a murderer, would turn and run away, back to the road, would call the police.

The police. He would be arrested. They would say he had murdered Patrell.

“Self-defence!” he cried to himself. “The way he looked at me.... He’d have killed me....”

Yet, at the time, he had not been afraid of Patrell’s killing him. It had been something else.... He remembered one snowy Christmas long ago, when he had been a boy. He had gone out in the woods with his new rifle, and had shot a rabbit. And it hadn’t died; it had lain twitching and kicking on the ground, and the same feeling had come over him then, the same panic.... He had beaten in the creature’s head with the rifle butt.... What was it, this atrocious passion to destroy a wounded and struggling thing ...?

The silence in the little glade was strange. It was becoming dreadful. No bird twittered, nothing stirred. It was like a wax-work scene of a murder. And it was a murder.

He could never prove that Patrell had attacked him. The truth of the matter was that Patrell had not attacked him. He

himself had struck the first blow—and all the other blows. He could not prove that he had killed Patrell in self-defence, for Patrell had done nothing to him. He did not know why he had killed him. No thought of such a thing, no impulse had come to him until he had seen Patrell at his feet.

“It was the way he looked at me. It was because I knew he was a thoroughly bad and dangerous man.”

That would not do for a jury. A jury would consider only facts, and the facts were that Branscombe had been paying marked attention to Mrs. Patrell, and had killed her husband.

He must conceal Patrell’s body at once, somewhere. Only, there wasn’t anywhere. No place to dig a grave, and nothing with which to dig it. He could think of only one thing, and that was preposterous. If he could get Patrell into his car.... Of course, he could not. He could not carry the body that far. He might be able to drag it, but he would surely meet someone. Other people used this short cut.

“No,” he thought. “I’ve got to get away, escape.... Go to South America—some place like that.”

But he could not get at his money. Was he to flee, penniless, be hounded, live in terror, and, without money, certainly be caught? It filled him with rage.

“I *won’t* lose everything!” he cried. “Never see Hilda again—or Eva.... Lose my money, my position in the world, everything—on account of that fellow. No, by Heaven! At least I’ll make a fight for it.”

He pulled the coat off Patrell’s head.

“O God! O God!” he whispered, staring at what he had done.

This was not the insolent, smiling Patrell he had struck down. This man who lay with closed eyes had an awful dignity, his white face looked noble, immeasurably remote from the world. No one must ever see this.... Branscombe put on the coat, and taking Patrell by the feet began dragging him along the path. He got out of breath at once; sweat was dripping from him; he had to stop and rest; then he began again. Patrell's arms went back over his head and his limp fingers made tracks in the dust. His jacket rumbled under him, but his face was serene as ever.

Branscombe forgot all apprehension. He was utterly absorbed in this task he had undertaken. He pulled and dragged at the body; he had to take care to avoid stones and snags. One of Patrell's shoes came off.

"You dam' fool!" muttered Branscombe. He had to get the shoe on again, and Patrell's limpness was infuriating. It took so long.... Then he went on. He had been going on so long that now he couldn't stop. He was scarcely aware of what he did or why he did it. He had to walk backward, and stooping; when he stopped once more to rest, he was amazed to see the highway. He had actually dragged Patrell all the way through the wood, and no one had seen him.

His car stood where he had left it; otherwise, the road was empty in the summer sun. This was a frequented road, though. There was no time to waste. He unlocked his car, and as he did so, another car shot past.

So great a weakness came over him that he had to sit down on the running board. But when he thought it over, he realized that Patrell's body was still screened from the road by the trees, and that the occupants of that swiftly moving

car could have seen nothing amiss. He must be quick, though, with this last part of the job.

“Don’t let a car come for a few moments!” he prayed. “Just for a few moments ...!”

This part was much harder than he had expected, harder than getting Patrell through the wood. Patrell wouldn’t get into the sedan decently. He doubled up.... If another car came along now....

But no car came. He got Patrell on the back seat, lying down, his legs hanging over the edge. Branscombe covered him with a rug, and from outside there was nothing to be seen. He seated himself behind the wheel with a long, tremulous sigh of relief. But he could not think where to go.

“Got to get away from here, anyway,” he told himself.

So he began to drive, at his usual moderate speed; his hands were steady enough; his vision, his hearing alert. Yet something was wrong with him. He no longer felt any fear; but a peculiar anxiety oppressed him, a sense of some extremely important thing forgotten.

“Did I leave anything there in the wood?” he asked himself. “A clue ...? Have I done something insanely stupid, without realizing it ...?”

Plenty of other cars passed him, but that caused him no alarm. Nobody would ever suspect what he had in the back of the car, and it was right and natural that nobody should suspect. He was not the kind of man to do such a thing; he could not quite believe that he had done it.

“The best thing might be,” he thought, “to drive well out into the country and find some lake or pond....”

He knew of no such place, though, and certainly he could not ask anyone.

“Some lonely road, then.... Leave him there....”

Coralie knew of their meeting. Coralie had left them alone together. If her father’s body were found, she would tell what she knew. Patrell must not be found, ever.

“And how in hell can I manage *that*?” he thought, in a rage.

He hated Patrell more than ever, because he could not get rid of him. Here he was in the car....

There was a sudden wail that made him jump. He knew what it was, however, a factory whistle blowing for the noon lunch hour.

“I told Hilda I’d lunch with her... But what can I do with this fellow? I’d like to throw him out in the road.... Serve him right. Only, of course, he’d be recognized.”

It came to him then that what he really should do was to bury Patrell. For a few moments the idea comforted him. It was not only the safe thing to do, but it was decent. But when he contemplated the practical difficulties, they were enormous. To begin with, he would have to find a suitable place, and then when he had done that, there was the actual digging. He didn’t know how long that might take; he had never done any digging. He had no spade, either, no implement, and he could not buy one. After twelve....

He would be late to lunch....

“Oh, damn it all!” he cried to himself, in angry despair.

He did not know where on the face of the earth he would go with his monstrous burden. He dared not stop the car,

dared not leave it. In his wretched perplexity, he turned toward home, and knew he dared not go there.

“Mister!” called a voice.

Standing by the roadside was a boy in a dark suit and a cap.

“Gimme a lift to the station, mister?”

“No!” said Branscombe, and drove on.

Almost at once he had to stop at a cross-road for a red light. He turned his head to look back at that boy with the vague impression in his mind that he had had the appearance of a bad character. He looked, and the boy was not there.

That was peculiar. There was a high wall on the side of the road where the boy had stood, and on the other side was an empty field. He was not in the field; it was not likely that he had climbed the high wall. No other car had come along to give him lift. Where was he?

It was a minor problem, but, in the circumstances, almost anything had the power to disturb Branscombe now. He looked back along the road, so intently that he missed the change of the light, and had to wait again. Another car drew up beside him, driven by a severe, grey-haired woman in spectacles.

“There’s a boy stealing a ride on the back of your car,” she said. “They ought to be put in jail. They’re a danger to themselves and everybody else.”

The light turned green, and she drove on. But Branscombe stopped his car. If the boy had looked in through the rear window....

“I’ll give you five dollars ...” said Branscombe, reaching his pocket. “Here! I’m in a hurry.”

CHAPTER V

The boy was standing in the road. He was not exactly a boy; it was his slight build and narrow shoulders that made him look so; he was a young fellow with a dark, oval face, black hair, half closed eyes, and a broad grin that had in it no sort of cheerfulness. Branscombe did not like the grin.

“Keep off!” he said, briefly.

“Why?” asked the other, in a reasonable tone.

“Because I don’t want you climbing on my car. I won’t have it.”

The other just stood there, grinning at him.

“Keep off!” cried Branscombe.

The boy went on grinning.

“Is he an idiot?” thought Branscombe. And hoped he was. “Now, clear out—” he began.

“Where are you going, mister?”

There was the quality of an evil dream in this dialogue; it was as if the boy existed in another dimension, and could not hear or could not understand what Branscombe said.

“Clear out!” he repeated, and the boy also repeated the last phrase he had himself used.

“Where you going, mister?”

“He is an idiot,” thought Branscombe. “I needn’t worry.” But what he felt was considerably worse than worry.

“If you climb on my car again,” he said, “I’ll call a policeman.”

“A policeman!” said the other, with a hoot of laughter. “I can see you!”

“Oh, my God!” thought Branscombe. “Is he an idiot or... Or did he see ...?”

There they stood in the quiet, shady road. Other cars passed them. This wouldn't do. This would look very strange.... He must get rid of this fellow.

“Here! Get along with you!” he said with a pretence at good-humour. “I'll give you a quarter, if you need it.”

“I ought to get more than that, mister.”

Branscombe understood that. Yet his instinct was to deny it, to evade the definite issue.

“Well,” he said, “if you're in need, I'll give you a dollar.”

The other only grinned.

“I'll give you five dollars ...” said Branscombe, reaching at his pocket. “Here! I'm in a hurry.”

The other took the five-dollar bill, but he did not move. “Why don't you go?” cried Branscombe.

“Gimme a lift, mister?”

“No!” said Branscombe. He moved toward the front of the car, and the other came with him.

“Gimme a lift, mister!”

It was not a request now; it was a demand. In his fear and wretchedness, Branscombe wished the creature dead. “If I could run over him ...” he thought.

“Jerry's my name, mister. I been out of work six months, you got any little job I could do for you....”

“Well, I haven't! And if you keep on annoying me, I'll notify the police.”

“Listen, mister!” said Jerry, suddenly serious and confidential. “You wouldn't know how to handle a thing like

this. You'll just get yourself in trouble. If you leave it to me, mister, I'll fix it up, and there won't nobody know one thing about it."

"Does he mean *that*?" thought Branscombe.

"For twenny-five dollars," said Jerry softly. "Isn't it worth that to you, mister?"

"Twenty-five dollars ..." thought Branscombe. "But that's—preposterous!"

If the fellow meant that he would dispose of Patrell for that sum, it was preposterously little. He couldn't mean that... Unless to him a thing like this was an ordinary, matter-of-fact occurrence. How strange to think that there were men to whom murder was commonplace; strange and horrible, yet somehow reassuring. It seemed to minimize the whole business.

But, of course, he must not admit anything to this creature.

"No," he said.

Jerry moved nearer to him.

"For twenny-five dollars, mister, I'll put that guy where there won't nobody find him. No worry for you, no trouble. *You* couldn't handle a situation like this—a man like *you*."

He spoke with a sort of sympathy; he made everything seem normal. There was a little job to be done, which he would undertake for a small sum, that was all.

Yet Branscombe still hesitated. He needed more time to think. He wanted to foresee, as best he could, what the consequences might be of accepting this offer. What had he to lose? The fellow already knew that there was a dead body in the car. If he undertook to dispose of it, he would so involve himself that he would not dare to betray

Branscombe. He would have made himself an accessory after the fact. He would have nothing to gain by informing the police, and moreover he wasn't, thought Branscombe, the sort who would be at all anxious to approach the police.

"If I refuse his offer ...?" thought Branscombe. "I haven't been able even to imagine any way of doing the thing myself. I couldn't go driving around like this much longer. The most trifling accident would be fatal to me..." He glanced at Jerry, who was staring at the ground, his hands in his pockets. "No!" he thought. "It would be a mistake, a terrible mistake, to let *him* get into the affair."

Only, Jerry was already in it. He had seen Patrell.

"If I could induce him—bribe him to keep quiet until I've disposed of Patrell myself, then there'd be no evidence against me. Nothing but this creature's word that he'd seen something in the car. I could simply deny it."

He remembered Coralie, and despair seized upon him. She knew that Branscombe and her father had been together, and Jerry knew where Patrell had gone. Even if he did think of some way to get rid of Patrell, these two would know.

"I couldn't be worse off, if I let this creature do as he suggests," he thought, and again glanced at the creature.

Jerry had lit a cigarette; somehow that gave him a horrible jauntiness. His cap was pulled down, shadowing his hollow face; he was shabby and starved; twenty-five dollars might well be an important thing to him. And to Branscombe how small a sum for so inestimable a service!

"It—it was an automobile accident," he said. "This man was injured by my car.... It was his fault, but I don't choose to be involved...."

“Sure,” said Jerry, soothingly.

“How do you propose to do it?”

“I’ll take you to a place,” said Jerry. “Only a mile, about. Then you leave me there with this guy, and you go home and forget it, mister. Nobody’ll find *him*.”

“Very well,” said Branscombe, curtly. “Get in front with me.”

For he was in very great haste now to be done with this. “I can drive you, mister. I used to be a chauffeur.”

“Very well!” said Branscombe, again.

Jerry drove remarkably well, but much faster than was Branscombe’s habit. He did not object to speed now, though. He leaned back in a relaxation that was almost contentment. He was obliged to trust Jerry, and it was a relief. He had the feeling that a dreadful thing was ended, an intolerable burden lifted from his shoulders, and that he could rest now.

Jerry got off the main road and took to lanes and by-ways unknown to Branscombe, and almost deserted. He did not pay much attention to the route Jerry took; he didn’t care. He was tired. The car stopped smoothly.

“You just get out, mister. Smoke a cigarette down the road a ways. And then you won’t have no more worries.”

Branscombe was able to do this with a singularly easy mind. The car stood before a weather-beaten old red barn at the end of a lane overgrown with weeds. There were open fields on either side, peaceful and empty under the hot sun. No human creature was in sight. He turned his back on the car and strolled off. He lit a cigarette and thought of nothing at all.

“O.K., mister,” called Jerry.

He was standing beside the car, and Patrell was not there. From his wallet Branscombe took out two ten-dollar bills and a five, and Jerry pocketed them.

“Thanks, mister!” he said, for all the world like a taxi driver pleased with a tip.

Branscombe backed the car and turned it and set off up the lane. At the turning he looked back, and Jerry was not in sight. He must have gone into the barn. Branscombe refused to think about what he might be doing in there. The thing was finished. It was regrettable, deplorable, but it was finished. He need not and must not think about it.

He was extremely tired and a little dazed. He lost his way on the unfamiliar roads, he drove slowly and unsteadily, and it was by sheer luck that he reached the main highway.

“I must let Eva know that I shan’t be home to lunch,” he thought. He had never neglected such matters; he thought it unpardonable.

“And I’ll be glad to get a wash and brush—” he said to himself, and stopped, struck by a thought that appalled him. There might be, surely there must be, some trace in his appearance of what had happened.

“Blood?” he thought.

He had not touched Patrell except to take him by the feet.... Yet he was afraid to look at his own hands. He couldn’t.... He must. He stopped the car and held up his hands. The knuckles of his right hand were red and caked with dried blood and dirt.

“How was it I didn’t notice that before?” he thought.

If he hadn’t noticed that, there might be other things too which he had not noticed. Blood on his clothes, in the car. He

twisted the reflector, and stared at his image. His hair was a little ruffled, his tie not quite straight, but otherwise he was unchanged; he had his usual aloof and distinguished air.

He looked in the back of the car. The rug was gone, but he could see nothing else amiss, although he made a most careful examination. He smoothed his hair, straightened his tie, and drew on a pair of wash leather gloves. But he could not believe that he looked as usual; the nearer he drew to home, the more his dread increased. He thought that Eva would read something in his face.... He wondered if he would be able to speak in a natural voice....

His knees were trembling as he mounted the steps of the veranda. That wouldn't do. He must control that, and he did; when he entered the room he was walking steadily.

"I believe I'll take a little whisky," he thought.

An innovation, that was. He was inclined to be severe about drinking; he would not take even a cocktail before lunch.

"No alcohol in working hours," he always said.

To-day, however, was exceptional. If Eva saw him taking a drink, he would tell her he did not feel very well, and she would be kind.... The thought of her kindness was balm to him, he longed now to see her. He opened the door with his latch key and started along the hall, quietly, hoping to get his drink from the dining-room before Eva saw him. The sound of voices from the drawing-room checked him; he stopped and looked in and saw Eva there with that Evans fellow.

He moved away noiselessly, his heart beating with violence.

"Curse the fellow!" he thought.

He could not possibly face that fellow, that stranger, just now. He didn't want Evans in his house; he didn't like him. It was wrong of Eva to let him come; it was unkind of her, disloyal. He had needed Eva to be here, alone. He went into the dining-room and unlocked the cupboard which contained his supply of wines and liquors; he poured himself a small drink of whisky and drank it quickly. He had a second drink; then, relocking the cupboard, he rang for the house-maid.

"Tell Miss Branscombe, please, that I shan't be home to lunch," he said.

He went up to his room, washed, changed into another suit, and went out of the house by the back door. He took the path that led past the drawing-room so that he could look in at the window. Eva was leaning back in her chair, her hands clasped behind her head; she was gazing seriously at nothing, and Evans, sitting opposite, was looking at her.

Branscombe felt desolate, he felt hurt and angry.

"We don't know anything about the fellow," he thought. "Eva ought to have more dignity...."

He could think of nothing but Eva and that fellow as he drove to Mrs. Patrell's. He had not expected this sort of thing from Eva.

"I wonder if she's seen much of the fellow, without my knowing it," he thought. "I told her I didn't like him...."

Mrs. Patrell's sedate house-maid smiled as she admitted him, and at once the atmosphere of this house enveloped him, the grace and tranquillity which Hilda Patrell created. Eva did her best, but her housekeeping was artless, even crude, compared with Hilda's. The way the flowers were arranged was a work of art to be admired beyond words, the

quiet loveliness of this room, airy and fragrant, the shutters were closed against the hot sun, and in the dimness the fine old furniture gleamed dully; there was a sense of permanence, of seemliness.

And Hilda herself was like that. As she came into the room, he was startled to see how beautiful she was, beautiful without effort, straight and proud and gentle. She had changed into a thin, dark dress that made her hair look startlingly blonde. She smiled, her honest, lovely smile, and held out her hand.

He meant only to raise it to his lips. But at the touch of her slender fingers a thrill ran through him, a sudden flame. He kissed her hand, he caught her in his arms, and held her close.

“Hilda!... I love you ...!”

“Andrew!... No!” she cried. “Andrew—you’ve forgotten Charles!”

CHAPTER VI

He released her at once, a little too quickly. For a moment she stood downcast, pale, obviously much disturbed; then she raised her eyes to his face. She opened her lips to speak, but was silent, staring at him.

“Andrew ...” she said. “Andrew, what’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” he said. “Nothing.”

He was beginning to recover himself now, but as his thoughts grew clearer, it was worse for him. He wanted to turn away from her, to flee from this house. He was aghast at what he had done. He had taken her in his arms, told her he loved her, when only a few hours ago he had killed her husband.

“If she knew ...” he thought.

If she knew, she would look at him with wild horror, she would scream if he came near her....

“You don’t look at all well,” she said, anxiously. “Will you take a little brandy?”

“Thanks,” he answered.

He wanted that brandy badly. He poured himself out a drink that surprised her, and made her still more anxious.

“You’re ill!” she said.

“I ...” he began. He had meant to say something about having narrowly escaped being run into by another car, but this third drink seemed to warm and illumine his brain, so that he thought of something better.

“I didn’t mean to behave like this,” he said. “I hope you can forgive me.... But ever since you told me this morning ...

I'm not myself....”

A faint colour rose in her sunburned cheeks.

“I'm sorry,” she said. “I—perhaps I ought to have seen....”

“I don't blame you, my dear.... And try not to blame me for losing my head for one moment.... Hilda, must I go away?”

For the first time he saw her at a loss. This obviously was a situation entirely new to her, and a little beyond her. She was without subtlety; she was candid and definite; and his attitude, being neither candid nor definite, confused her. “I value your friendship so much ...” she said, with hesitancy. “But don't you think that perhaps ...?”

“You mean you can't forgive me? Ever?”

She was silent for a long time, and he felt that he knew what she was thinking. Never had his mind been so lucid, so quick; he watched her, and felt sure that he would win, felt sure that he had said exactly the right words, in exactly the right tone.

“I'm afraid I'm rather strait-laced, Andrew,” she said. “But —” Then suddenly she smiled, a valiant and touching smile. “We'll just forget this, shall we?”

They had lunched together before this, but to-day it was different. There had been, before to-day, a nebulous sort of friendship between them. They had been easy and happy together. Now she was constrained, ill at ease, and he pretended to be so.

In his heart, instead of shame, he had a strange, unholy pride. She thought his love for her an impermissible thing, but it was so infinitely more guilty than she could possibly imagine.... She believed that she was a married woman.

“And how am I ever going to let her know ...?” he thought.

He had not faced this before. She was free now, but she did not know it, and she must not know it. Nobody must know that Patrell was dead. But his disappearance would have to be explained in some way; he couldn't just vanish. That would be almost as bad as if his body were found. The man must have friends, relations somewhere who would become anxious at his absence. If a search were made for him, it would inevitably lead to his wife. Coralie would tell her mother that she had left Branscombe and her father together. Branscombe would be questioned....

“And,” thought Branscombe, “if they question me, I'm lost.”

In a few hours he would have to face Coralie. And if she asked him anything about Patrell....

“This is much more complicated than I realized ...” thought Branscombe.

What he wanted was to be alone, to think this thing out. But he could not leave Hilda too abruptly; above all things there must be nothing strange in his behaviour which could be remembered and brought up against him later. They had coffee on the veranda, really good coffee, such as Eva never provided.

“I'm disappointed in Eva,” he thought. “She's....”

“Andrew....”

“Yes?” he answered, turning to Hilda.

“It wasn't right of me to trouble you with my affairs as I did this morning.”

“I wish you wouldn't look at it that way,” he said. “I wish you would feel that I'm unalterably your friend, Hilda. I wish

you'd let me help you, in any way. It would make me happy.”

Before this, she had been a woman of admirable dignity and poise, and now she showed an embarrassment that was almost awkward. It was curious and touching.

“Is it because she loves me?” he thought.

For a moment a great wonder filled him, something almost like awe. She was so honest, so valiant, so splendid; her love would be a thing to honour any man on earth. But then something else came, to drown his brief humility.

“There must be something about me ...” he thought.

There must be something extraordinary about him for a woman like Hilda to love him. There must be an extraordinary strength and intelligence in him, that he could endure what he had endured this morning, and not be crushed.

“I've never understood my own character,” he thought.

“Will you bring Coralie home at five, Andrew?” asked Hilda.

“Yes ...” he answered. “Try not to worry, my poor girl.”

“I can't ...” she began, and stopped, looking at the street. A taxi had stopped before the gate, and a man was getting out, a square-shouldered man of medium height, stiff and straight, with a little sandy moustache. He paid the driver and opened the gate, came along the path, walking with a noticeable limp.

“But it looks like Vincent!” she said, frowning. “I don't see....”

He took off his soft hat and smiled at her, a somewhat anxious smile; a good-looking man, thought Branscombe.

“Vincent!” she exclaimed, and what her tone implied Branscombe could not tell; could not tell by her face whether she were pleased, or distressed, or merely startled.

The man came up the steps.

“Mr. Branscombe—Captain Colton.”

The two men bowed, and Colton looked at Branscombe with an odd intentness. The situation had altogether an awkward quality, which Hilda ought to have prevented. No one said anything for a long moment.

“It’s—quite a surprise to see you, Vincent,” she said, at last.

“I... Yes ...” he said. “I’m looking for a cottage in the neighbourhood, and naturally, I stopped in....”

“A cottage *here*?”

“Well, yes,” he said, as if in apology.

There was something wrong here, something Branscombe could not grasp. Who was this fellow, and what was Hilda’s feeling toward him ...? She roused herself, with a visible effort, and began to talk.

“I wonder if you’ll like it here, Vincent. Somehow it’s hard to think of you in a summer colony.... Mr. Branscombe can tell you something about it. He and his sister have taken a house, out on the Point.”

“Hm ...!” said Colton. “Very nice.”

There was another silence, which Branscombe ended. “We find it very agreeable,” he said.

“You do?” said Colton, turning toward him politely.

“Quiet, of course,” said Branscombe. “But we like that.”

“I see!” said Colton, and then turned to Hilda. “Coralie ...” he said, “she must have grown....”

“She’s taller than I now. She’s thirteen now.”

“Thirteen, eh?”

It was, thought Branscombe, an idiotic conversation. And when he looked more closely at Colton, it occurred to him that the man’s face was stupid.

“Coffee, Vincent?”

“Thank you, no.... Fact, I’ll have to be getting along now, Hilda.... But if I may, I’ll—er—call you up later—arrange to see you again ...?”

“Of course!” she said, without heartiness.

He took his leave then, and went off down the path and along the shady street, very erect and soldierly in spite of his limp.

An extraordinarily brief and pointless visit, thought Branscombe.

“Colton is an old friend of Charles’s,” said Hilda.

Branscombe hoped that his slight start had not been apparent.

“I can’t imagine what he’s doing here,” she went on. “I haven’t seen or heard of him for years and years.... I wish he hadn’t come.”

“Why?” asked Branscombe. “Don’t you like him?”

“I like him, in a way,” she answered, frowning again. “He’s one of the most honourable, generous men who ever lived. But he’s a martinet. He was horribly upset when Charles and I separated. He did everything he could to bring us together again. That’s why I wish he hadn’t come. I’m

afraid he might want to begin that again. I can't see what else would bring him here."

Nothing could have been more disturbing to Branscombe than the sudden and unaccountable appearance of an old friend of Patrell's—on this particular day.

"Could he and Patrell have come out here together?" he thought. "My God! Perhaps he has an engagement to meet Patrell this afternoon ...!"

He told Hilda that he had an errand to do, and must leave at once. The abruptness of his departure might seem odd, but he felt that if he stayed here any longer, his behaviour would be still more odd. He could not talk. He had to get away and think.

He drove out into the country, drove at random. He marvelled at his own fortitude. He was not dazed or benumbed; he realized his position clearly. He had killed a man. Yet he had none of the conventional emotions about this act; no horror, no remorse. All that he felt was an overpowering dread and anxiety, and a determination to save himself.

He was menaced now on two sides. By Colton and by Coralie. Either one of them could, at any moment, bring about a crisis. He must be prepared to answer questions about Patrell.

"Coralie will say that we met. I can't deny that. She may be able to repeat some of our conversation. Well, suppose I say that I bought him off? Paid him to get out and leave the child alone. That would account for his disappearance. I could say that our bargain was for him to leave the country at once. That's the sort of thing he would do, too. Man without any decency...."

It seemed to him that this story was remarkably plausible and ingenious; it might well serve to keep people quiet for a time. Not for very long, though; he did not delude himself about that. But the great thing was to gain time. Events were pressing too closely upon him, and he disliked being hurried.

Not until he turned back did he realise how extremely painful was the task immediately before him. He did not want to meet Patrell's child.

"She may refuse to come with me," he thought. "I hope to Heaven she will. Perhaps she's gone home already."

At this very moment she might be at home, telling Hilda of that meeting in the wood.

"Hilda may well think it's strange of me not to have mentioned it to her," he thought. "She'll wonder why I didn't tell her Patrell had gone and that she needn't worry any more."

He could explain that, though. He would appear reluctant and unhappy, as if it were intolerable to him to speak of her husband's baseness. He hoped ardently that the child would be gone.

But as soon as he stopped the car outside the house where she was visiting, the door opened and Coralie came running down the steps. She got in beside him without a word of greeting; he glanced at her once, saw an odd, hostile look on her face, and was silent. Patrell's child.... "Mr. Branscombe!" she said, presently, her voice curt and challenging.

"Yes?"

"I suppose you told Mother."

"Told her?"

“That I met Daddy. I *knew* you’d tell her. And it was *mean*! It was mean to worry her so. I didn’t want her to know, because she couldn’t possibly understand. She’s wonderful about everything else, but she doesn’t understand *him*. She’s led a sort of sheltered life, and she simply couldn’t understand a nature like his.”

Patrell’s words, these must be. The child was crying.

“I haven’t told your mother,” said Branscombe.

“But you will, of course. And it’s mean! It’s not because I’m one bit ashamed of meeting Daddy secretly. It’s because I *hate* to hurt Mother. She wouldn’t understand that I love both of them.”

This was horrible, unbearable.

“I won’t tell her, Coralie,” he said. “Don’t cry, dear.”

“What?” she demanded incredulously.

“I shan’t mention your meetings.”

“But *you* couldn’t understand!” she cried. “I mean, I could see you were against him. All the awfully respectable people are against him, because he’s adventurous. He doesn’t care about money, and things like that.”

“Don’t cry, Coralie.... I’m very sorry.”

She looked at him, her long lashes wet with tears—a look of silent, steady enquiry, a look hard for him to bear.... She knew ...!

“You look sort of funny ...” she said.

He would have to stop looking “funny.”

“The thing worries me,” he said. “Don’t you think it would be better to trust your mother’s judgment?”

“No,” she answered. “I’ve thought it over a lot. The first time Daddy met me, I was awfully upset. He told me Mother wouldn’t want me to see him. He told me how much he’d missed me ever since Mother took me away. But he left it entirely up to me whether we’d better go on seeing each other. I thought it out, and I made up my mind I’d go on. He’s frightfully fond of Mother. He’s really sorry for having been sort of wild. I thought that maybe later on I could get her to see things differently.”

Branscombe said nothing.

“This thing is not finished,” he said to himself. “It’s only beginning. The thing that has happened was only the first step along a road—and I can’t see the end.”

CHAPTER VII

He left Coralie at her gate, and drove off, not even looking to see if Hilda were on the veranda. The idea of talking to anyone at all wearied and dismayed him; he wanted to go home and rest, lock himself in his room. But that he must not do; he must avoid anything unusual. He would have to dine with Eva and talk to her. He had to go on living, unaffected by what he had done.

It was necessary to find a definite attitude toward his act. He must know what to think about Andrew Branscombe. The just man, the aloof and distinguished scholar had gone; what had replaced him?

“I acted upon impulse,” he thought. “I admit it was a mistaken impulse. But there was no premeditation. It was not a murder. Not a crime. You might honestly call it an accident. I killed him because at the time it seemed necessary.”

He left the car in the garage, and walked toward the house. Eva was on the veranda, just sitting there in the late afternoon sun. He had seen her like this often enough, yet now it made a new impression upon him; now it seemed to him that she looked forlorn, a young, pretty creature, who should be active and gay. He remembered that she had protested a little against his plans for the summer.

“Andrew, couldn’t we go to an hotel? Some place where it would be livelier?”

He had explained to her that the places she called “lively” were simply noisy, and filled with uncongenial people. But he had known that the people he called “uncongenial” were not so to her; he had known that she did not want a house

like this, in which to continue their correct and unvaried routine.

“I’ve been a fool!” he thought, with a sudden fear. “I shouldn’t have insisted on this sort of life for her... I’ll have to make some sort of change....”

If he did not, he might lose her, and that would be the supreme misfortune. She was the one human being who belonged to him, upon whom he could absolutely depend. He loved Hilda Patrell, but he did not need her as he needed Eva.

“Eva,” he said, “would you like to drive over to Marlowe Beach after dinner? They say it’s very lively....”

“But I’d love it, Andy!”

She seemed so very pleased and touched that he wished he had done more of this. His life would have to be different, livelier, so that she should be content, and not wish for anything more. They went to an hotel, sat on a terrace overlooking the sea, and the dance music from inside came to them, faint and gay.

(Patrell would hear no more music.)

Branscombe ordered a fruit lemonade for Eva, and whisky and soda for himself; he lit a cigar. The whisky was like nectar, the tobacco had an exquisite aroma, the sea wind blew soft against his face.

(Patrell would never smoke, never drink again. A man was a fool who did not relish what he had while he could.)

Eva talked to him in her cheerful, inconsequent way. He liked to hear her; she was young and pretty and careless. And he too was young. All the delights of the world were open to him; he had money and freedom. He was happy with an

almost unearthly joy; it was as if he had by a miracle escaped some extreme danger. He was happy because he was alive.

He wanted to stay late on the terrace, for there was in his mind a dim dread of the night. He was afraid that he would not be able to sleep, and that, lying awake, his new happiness would turn to something very different. But Eva began to yawn and yawn; she admitted that she was sleepy, and he had to take her home.

He undressed and got into bed, and he thought he would read, read all night, if necessary. But he grew drowsy at once, and fell asleep; he slept his regular eight hours without even a dream to trouble him. When he opened his eyes, he saw a steady, gentle rain falling, and he was pleased. He always enjoyed a rainy day; he would sit in the library with his pipe and his books; he would get on with a little essay he had planned: "The Dog in the Renaissance."

Patrell....

"I'm not evading that," he said to himself. "I realise that psychologically it's very dangerous to evade anything of that sort. I'll face it squarely. I admit that I—that I did it. But it's irrevocable. I've got to turn my mind to other matters, and not brood."

What other matters? His writing, his reading suddenly appeared to him as sickeningly dull and futile. And that frightened him. How was he to exist without his scholarly pursuits?

"A more active life," he thought. "I believe that's what I need."

His love? He found in himself a strange disinclination to think about Hilda at all. That wouldn't do. That was

dangerous. That was an inhibition. He *must* think about her.

The situation was profoundly disturbing. Hilda was a widow but she did not know it, and he could not tell her. He could not marry her; he could not mention marriage to her.

“God!” he thought. “What irony! I’ve committed a crime for her sake. And neither she nor I can profit by it.”

“I wasn’t aware of my motive in my conscious mind. But it was undoubtedly my love for Hilda that aroused that—that unusual anger in me.... It’s not like me to lose all self-control. Only a very powerful emotion could do it....”

A strange peace filled him. He had committed a crime for the sake of the woman he loved, and she must never know.

“I can’t see her again,” he thought. “Not ever. She’ll understand.”

She wouldn’t exactly understand, of course. She would think he did not come back because he had betrayed himself by the admission of a forbidden love. She would have to go on thinking it was a forbidden love.

“It’s my punishment,” he thought. He was quiet, calm, resigned. It was impossible to marry Hilda, and he renounced her.

“I’ll leave here,” he thought. “I’ll take a trip with Eva.”

The confusion and trouble of yesterday had left him. There would, of course, be details to arrange, but he could manage them, and there was no violent haste. Coralie was not going to tell her mother. If that Colton fellow had had an appointment with Patrell and was anxious about his absence, it would be some time before he would make any trouble. It was very disagreeable, though, to think about that fellow. If

any trouble were coming, thought Branscombe, it was coming through him.

“As soon as I saw him, I felt uneasy.... Type of man I don’t like. Secretive ...,” thought Branscombe.

But if Colton did in some way find out that Branscombe and Patrell had met, then Branscombe would tell his story of having bought Patrell off, and who could prove anything to the contrary?

He was sitting at breakfast with Eva when Hilda telephoned.

“Andrew ...?” she said. “If you’re not busy, may I see you this morning?”

He agreed at once, with a grave courtesy. But in his heart he was annoyed; he didn’t want to see her.

“I suppose she’s still worrying about her child,” he thought. “She’s almost too maternal. Obsessed with that child. I don’t feel like discussing that thing interminably. And now that she knows how I feel, you’d think she’d have more tact....”

Still, when he saw Hilda, he forgave her, because she was so lovely, so desirable; and in her clear eyes he saw so candid a faith in him. She was still constrained, though, almost shy. She began to speak at once, as if what she had to say needed all her courage.

“Andrew.... There’s something I’ve made up my mind to do, and I wanted to tell you first....”

“Yes ...?” he said, and waited.

“I’ve been thinking things over ...” she went on. “I ... about yesterday....”

The colour rose in her cheeks; she was, he thought, singularly ingenuous for a married woman of her age. And it pleased him; it made him feel a man of the world. “I don’t want anything to interfere with our friendship,” she said, “unless, of course, you feel that you’d rather—we didn’t see each other....”

“I want to see you,” he said. “I want to be your friend. I want you to know that you can trust me never to take advantage of your kindness. My dear, as long as you want I’ll be your friend, and nothing else.”

He meant that, and it seemed to him that it was chivalrous of him to feel so. She looked up at him with a smile, and for a moment they were both silent.

“I’m glad ...” she said. And then, with a visible effort: “Vincent came to see me last night. It’s upset me.”

“Did he say anything?”

“No! No, nothing at all. He only sat and smoked and talked about nothing. That’s really what bothered me. There must be some reason for his suddenly appearing like this after all these years.... Yet he didn’t say anything....”

Some reason ... some reason for Patrell’s friend appearing just on that especial day....

“I told you before how anxious he used to be to reconcile us. I don’t know whether he still has that idea.... Probably he has. Vincent’s the most tenacious person. He never gives up an idea. Once he starts a thing, he goes on and on....”

And once he had a suspicion, he would go on and on ...? Saying nothing, until he was sure?

“I believe,” she said, “that Charles sent him here. That makes an intolerable situation. I’m really fond of Vincent,

but I can't—I won't discuss my affairs with him. Very likely he'd think that I ought to let Coralie see her father. But I won't! It's not vindictiveness. It's only that the child's forgotten him, and I can't have her troubled and worried by a divided allegiance. You—do you agree with me, Andrew?"

"Entirely!" he said.

"Then there's only one thing to do. I'm going to see Charles to-morrow."

"No!" cried Branscombe, off his guard for a moment. If she went to see Patrell, she would learn that he had disappeared....

"I've got to," she said; "it's the only way. I've got to see Charles and talk to him. I'm going to ask him to let me divorce him. I never cared before. But now—now I'll offer to settle something on him."

"So he's like that?" said Branscombe. "He'll accept money from you?"

His voice was unsteady with anger, but it was anger against her. Why couldn't she let things alone? This thing she proposed meant extreme danger to him....

"Yes," she said, with a slight quiver of the lips. "He'd do that. But in other ways ... he's not a bad man, Andrew, not cruel or evil. He's only reckless and pleasure-loving. I'm sure that if I talk to him, he'll promise not to see Coralie."

Branscombe was silent. He could think of nothing plausible to say that would deter her, no way to avert this danger. Go she would, and she would learn that he wasn't where he lived, wasn't anywhere.

"Hilda," he said, "will you tell me where he lives?"

"But why?"

“It’s so stupid of me ...” he said. “But will you humour me ...? If you’re going there, I’d like to know where it is ... in case....”

He spoke—haltingly; he had the tone, the look of a miserably unhappy lover. And she accepted it. She gave him Patrell’s address.

“Don’t worry, Andrew,” she said. “I’m sure that if I see Charles, he’ll listen to reason.”

“The hell he will!” thought Branscombe. Patrell would never again listen to reason or to anything else.

CHAPTER VIII

Blanche would have paid the room-rent if she could, and she felt that her landlady ought to appreciate her innate honesty.

“You treat me like I was a crook!” she cried.

“Well ...” said Mrs. Hawkes.

“Well, what?” Blanche demanded.

She was very sensitive about her position, and never at any time very sure of herself. She was a charming girl, tall, somewhat too thin, with a pointed face and grey, dark-lashed eyes; she knew she was pretty, but that didn’t help her much, because she knew that she had no style.

“When my husband gets back—” she said, haughtily.

“That ‘husband’ of yours ...” said Mrs. Hawkes.

The implication was unmistakable, and Blanche was angry and ashamed.

“He’ll be back I guess to-day,” she said. “And when he comes he’ll pay you, and we’ll get right out of your dirty old room.”

“It’s dirty enough now,” said Mrs. Hawkes. “How do you think it’s ever going to be properly cleaned with you lying in bed half the day, and smoking your nasty cigarettes all over the place?”

In her heart Blanche was ashamed of that, too. She had been brought up to be neat and industrious; it was only recently that she had fallen into these lazy ways.

“Will you kindly tell me what business it is of *yours* if I smoke?” she asked, still haughtily.

“I’ll be glad—” Mrs. Hawkes began, when the door-bell rang, and she went off to answer it. Blanche lay back on the bed, and defiantly lit another cigarette, and tried to think of cutting things to say to Mrs. Hawkes. There was a loud knock at the door, and Mrs. Hawkes re-entered.

“Here’s somebody asking for that ‘husband’ of yours,” she said. “Wants to know when he’s expected back.”

“Well, to-day, I guess.”

“He says it’s important. You’d better go out and tell him what you ‘guess.’ I’ve got work to do.”

Blanche had a wedding ring, but it gave her little confidence. She realized that there was something indefinable about her which made Mrs. Hawkes and probably everybody else on earth immediately suspicious of her respectability. She didn’t, she thought, look like a married woman, and if this visitor came on business, he would see through her at once. She got up, thin and supple in her silk pyjamas; she washed her face and powdered it, and applied a lip-stick. She brushed her soft dark hair, put on a dressing-gown and slippers, and went out into the hall.

A man stood waiting there, a tall man, stiff as a poker, with remarkably thick flaxen hair, and wearing eye-glasses. He had a look of severity that daunted her.

“You’re Mrs. Patrell?” he asked. “I asked for Mr. Patrell.”

It occurred to her that he was a detective, or a policeman, and that it might be a criminal offence to say she was Mrs. Patrell.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“I want to speak to you. It’s urgent. Isn’t there some room ...?”

“No,” she answered, and was glad there wasn’t. This man made her uneasy.

“There’s a certain amount of money coming to you ...” he said, in a low tone. “I can’t discuss it here.”

He even knew she needed money. And she didn’t any longer think that this was a detective. He spoke like an actor, she thought; he was impressive. She glanced at him and found him looking at her sternly through his glasses.

“Well, we could go in my room,” she said. “If you’ll excuse it being all upset....”

“Very well!” he said, and followed her in there.

“I got up late this morning,” she explained, with an apologetic smile. “I was sort of tired.”

He did not smile, and he glanced about the room with an expression that dismayed her. He was obviously disgusted with its disorder, and disgusted with her, too. She was by nature a gentle creature, and for all her small vanities she was humble at heart. If this man were disgusted with her, she was ready to believe that she was disgusting, and felt miserable about it.

He closed the door.

“My name is Brown,” he said. “Perhaps you’ve heard Patrell speak of me?”

“Well, I—maybe I have. I don’t know.... I mean, my husband knows a lot of people....”

“I may as well tell you now, madam,” said Mr. Brown, “that I know Patrell is not your husband.”

“Well, he is!” she said, and began to cry.

“No,” he said, “I understand the situation very well. Patrell told me himself. He asked me to come here to-day, to see if

he had returned. If he hadn't, then I was to make a certain arrangement for you. You'll have to leave here at once."

"I can't."

"You'll have to," he said, with sudden vehemence. "If you don't, it will mean very serious trouble."

"For Charles? Oh! What's happened?"

"You must leave here at once."

"I can't. I owe the landlady."

"I'll attend to that. You must leave here, before anyone comes to question you."

"Question ...? You mean—the police?"

"Patrell wants you to know as little as possible about the whole thing. For your own sake. He wants you to go at once to this other place, and wait there."

"Will I see him soon?"

"Not for a day or two. But I have some money for you.... Now, I want you to tell the landlady that I'm your brother, and that I'm taking you to Montreal, where your mother is seriously ill. Tell her Patrell is joining you there."

She was not analytical of herself or of others; she was much more trusting than was good for her. But suddenly, for no reason she could have explained, a strange, formless suspicion came over her, a distrust of this man that was almost fear.

"But why?" she demanded. "If there's anything wrong, why didn't Charles send me a note or something?"

"He didn't have time. And there's no time to waste now. You must start packing."

“No!” she said. “I don’t want to just go away like this, and not even know where I’m going.”

Mr. Brown came a step nearer, and she drew back; they stood facing each other in the close, untidy room.

“If you care anything at all for Patrell,” he said, “you’ll do as I say, now.”

“No, I ...” she said, frightened, uncertain, but obstinate.

“Good God!” he exclaimed. “The idea of the whole thing being ruined by a creature like *you!*”

That made her cry again. She had so little self-esteem to protect her from such hurts. And Mr. Brown had no compassion for her tears.

“I’ll pay what you owe here,” he said. “And I’ll see that you’re provided for elsewhere until Patrell comes back. If you come at once. Otherwise, I’ll leave you—without a cent. And you’ll be doing Patrell a great injury.”

“But where is he? He said he’d only be gone for the afternoon, and he didn’t come back all night.”

“He’ll have to explain that himself.”

“But he must be in bad trouble if...”

“He is,” said Mr. Brown, briefly. “And you’d better help him by doing what I say.”

She stood before him, in the silk dressing-gown that had belonged to Patrell, her dark hair carelessly brushed, her face pale; she was penniless, she was unbefriended. She had every disadvantage, and still she opposed this man. Certainly not very effectually, but it was remarkable that she did so at all, for her nature was so pliant, so amiable, so credulous.

“But why didn’t Charles send me any word? He could have rung up.”

“See here!” said Brown, with contemptuous impatience. “This happens to be a very serious matter. Anyone but you would have read between the lines and understood that the police have got to be given a false scent to follow.”

She grew very white. A few months ago she had been a respectable girl, very respectable, daughter of a small upstate farmer. She had been a waitress in a New York tea-room, and she had been proud of the job because it was a refined, high-class tea-room. She had been haughty toward men who had made advances, before she met Patrell. But she loved Patrell, and with him she had abandoned all her old habits of neatness and haughty virtue. Patrell had been lazy, and she had been lazy with him; he had thought it was a joke to owe money, and she had laughed with him; she had learned to smoke, she had learned to be extravagant. But her feeling about the police was ineradicable. To be in any way involved with the police was supremely disgraceful.

“Has Charles ...?” she asked. “Did Charles ...?”

“You’ll have to ask him. I can’t waste any more time. I came here to help you and Patrell, and you’ve been obstinate and suspicious. You behave as if I were trying to swindle you. Even for Patrell’s sake I can’t do any more. You’ll have to make up your mind immediately whether you’ll do as he wants or whether you’ll add to his difficulties.”

“I’ll come,” she said.

He gave her money for Mrs. Hawkes and told her he would return in an hour. When she went to Mrs. Hawkes she was crying, and the tears were genuine; she wept because Charles was in trouble, and because Mr. Brown had been contemptuous toward her, and had made her feel contemptible. She was never quite sure whether her life with

Patrell was simply disgraceful or the gallant adventure he called it. She never quite realised what she was doing, and certainly she never had any idea where she was heading. In a way, it had astonished her that so superior a man as Patrell should fall in love with her, but after all, it was so much like a movie. He was her first lover; she could not imagine ever giving a thought to another man. Patrell was kind and good-humoured, generous to her when he had any money, and she loved him faithfully.

Although when he said that they would get married presently, after his affairs were in order, she didn't believe that. In the first place, she had come to the conclusion that he was a gambler, such as she had seen in the pictures, and she did not believe his affairs would ever be in order. And in the second place, she was quite unable to believe in a future. As things were now, so things would always be. Rather stupid, Blanche was: a girl with a dozen faults and weaknesses—and one or two virtues. She was loyal, she was kind, she was honest.

Her tears made her somewhat incoherent story seem plausible to Mrs. Hawkes.

“I hope your poor dear mother will get better,” she said. “And I hope you and Mr. Patrell will be back here before long, dearie.”

Blanche hoped so, too. This room in which they had lived for so long was dear to her; it was home. She cried again as she packed Charles's things with hers in two bags.

When Mr. Brown returned the bags were ready, and she was dressed in a thin dark frock and a wide-brimmed black straw hat. She was pretty, in spite of her tear-stained face, but she was countrified.

He had a taxi waiting, and he hurried her into it. She asked him questions about Charles, but his sharp answers disheartened her. She glanced at him, and suddenly it came to her mind that this spectacled man at her side hated her. She thought it was not mere impatience that he felt, not disgust, but hatred. And that frightened her. She wished she had not come with him, wished she had waited at Mrs. Hawkes's for Charles, even if Mrs. Hawkes had been very mean about the rent. Now she felt curiously and alarmingly cut off from her former life.

The place to which Mr. Brown took her surprised her. It was not a lodging-house; it was a small hotel in the West Seventies, with an air of quiet respectability.

“Register as Miss Brown—Miss—whatever your name is—Brown,” he told her. “You’re supposed to be my sister.”

“But will Charles know to ask for me by that name?”

“Yes,” he answered with a frown. “When Patrell comes, he’ll make some other arrangement. But at present it would be extremely dangerous to use his name. Or even mention it to anyone.”

She caught his arm.

“But—give me your address, will you?” she said. “I mean—so there’ll be somebody I can—kind of keep in touch with....”

For she did not want to be Miss Brown, left here alone in this strange place where she must not mention Charles's name.

“No,” said Brown. “I’ll ring you up, to-morrow or the next day, to see if Patrell’s come back.”

“Will you *promise* to ring me up?”

He gave her a chilly, glittering stare.

“Yes. In the meantime, your room and meals are paid for a week in advance.”

Her room was unexpectedly luxurious, a sunny, well-furnished room with a private bath. She smoked and looked out of the window, and at six o'clock she went down to the dining-room. She was still more impressed. She was shown to a little table with a lamp on it; she had a dinner which seemed to her remarkably good. When she had finished she wanted to smoke a cigarette in the lounge, but the sight of the queenly dowagers sitting there daunted her. She bought a magazine at the newsstand and took it up to her room. She undressed and got into bed, and for a time was interested in a love story.

And then something made her remember Charles, and she missed him. She cried and cried for him.

CHAPTER IX

She had made no mistake in thinking that Mr. Brown hated her. He went off filled with a furious scorn against her. Her room at Mrs. Hawkes's had been redolent of perfume, and it seemed to him that he could not get the scent out of his nostrils.

"A thoroughly bad woman," he said to himself, and thought of savage names for her.

Her dressing-gown had revealed a glimpse of pink silk; in her dishevelment she had looked odiously soft and pretty and submissive. He hated her.

"A woman like that deserves absolutely no consideration," he thought. Certainly he was not disposed to show her much. She was a complication he had not expected.

He walked to the place where his car was parked, and getting into it drove out of the city faster than was his habit. In Pelham he found a quiet side road where he stopped and took off the glasses and the blond wig, which he had worn, years ago, in a school play. He knew they did not constitute a disguise, but if Mrs. Hawkes or Blanche should ever be questioned, they would say that a blond man in eye-glasses had come enquiring for Patrell—and who would connect that man with Andrew Branscombe?

"I detest all this hole-and-corner business," he thought. "It's my nature to be frank and straightforward. I don't like all this intriguing."

But still less would he like enquiries to be made for Patrell. He hoped he had stopped Hilda for a time; she would go to Mrs. Hawkes's and she would learn that her husband

had been living there with another woman whom he called his wife. She would learn that the girl had gone away with her brother. Perhaps that would be enough for her.

“But suppose she wants to go on with this divorce idea?” he thought. “That would mean a lawyer.”

He could not have a lawyer involved in this. Only, how was he to stop it?

“I’m sick of the whole business!” he cried to himself.

It seemed a monstrous injustice. He was willing to admit that he had committed a wrong—an excusable one, considering the circumstances, but still a crime against the law of the land. He would, he thought, have regretted it, if only he could be let *alone*. He had already suffered so much....

“And now I’ll have to go on and on,” he thought, in a sort of despair. “I’ll have to keep that girl quiet. I’ll have to prevent Hilda from making any search for Patrell.”

He had lived all his life more or less isolated from his fellows and protected by his modest fortune. There had been nothing that he wanted badly to get, to struggle for; he had never intrigued or plotted. But now that he had to, he discovered in himself a surprising facility.

He drove home, and shutting himself into the library, composed a letter.

DEAR MRS. PATRELL:

I hope you will forgive me the wrong I done you. My mother is dying and she has begged me to give up Charles and lead a good life. I only want him near me till this is over, and then he is coming back to ask your forgiveness like I do.

I cannot sign my real name because of the disgrace I have brought on a respectable family, so I will sign it

ONE WHO TRULY REPENTS.

He was well satisfied with this; it seemed to him in exactly the right tone; he believed it would keep Hilda quiet for a time. Her conscience would impel her to wait for Patrell to return before she started proceedings.

But he would also have to keep that girl quiet. Blanche, her name was; he had looked over her shoulder when she registered.

“I wish she was dead,” he thought, and it did not seem to him an evil wish. “No future ahead for a hussy like that. Nothing but shame and misery. When Patrell doesn’t come back, she’ll look for another man.”

Another man, he thought, would come and live with her in another untidy room filled with strange, disturbing perfume.... The girl was a disgusting slattern. But her skin was white as milk.... He got up and paced the library, very angry.

He intended to copy the letter on cheap paper, in a disguised hand, and post it in New York to-morrow. To-morrow Hilda would go to Mrs. Hawkes’s and learn about Patrell’s infidelity, and the next day she would get this letter. It seemed to him that he could do nothing more at the moment.

It was time to dress for dinner; he heard Eva run up the stairs, with a swift rush, like a child. And his heart melted toward her. He had always been very fond of Eva, but he had not realised how powerful was the bond which united him with this one human creature who depended entirely upon

him. He was not certain of Hilda's feeling toward him, but no matter how much she might care for him, she did not need him. She was self-sufficing; she had her own money, her own life, her secure place in the world, her child. Eva had only himself.

As he left the library he almost collided with the housemaid hurrying down the hall.

"Excuse me, sir, but there's someone asking to see you."

"Who?"

"He didn't give any name, sir. He's waiting outside—"

"You know perfectly well that I won't see people like that. Send him away."

"Yes, sir. He said please to tell you, sir, that he did a little job for you yesterday, and could he speak to you about that."

Branscombe felt the blood drain from his face; he moved away, so that the girl should not notice.

"I'll—see him ..." he said.

He knew who it was. There, standing on the path, was Jerry. Branscombe went down the veranda steps and approached him, and Jerry touched his cap.

"I thought maybe you'd give me a job, mister," he said, respectfully.

"No," said Branscombe. "I have no jobs to give anyone."

"I'm a good chauffeur, mister."

"No. I don't need a chauffeur."

"Listen, mister! That money you give me yesterday is all gone. I been out of work so long, I owed the whole of it, and more. I haven't had a meal to-day, mister."

When he looked at this scarecrow of a fellow, Branscombe felt a hatred so violent that it made him sick. He had never known hatred until he met Patrell; had never experienced any strong emotions; and now it seemed to him that he was being continually shaken by these internal storms. He hated this fellow, he hated Blanche, he still hated Patrell.

“I haven’t got a cent, mister, and nothing to eat all day.”

“That doesn’t interest me,” said Branscombe.

He wished the wretched creature would die of starvation. He could feel no fear of anyone so abject; he turned his back on him and was moving away.

“Here, now!” said Jerry, indignantly. “You can’t treat me like this! Not after what I done for you.”

Branscombe turned on him savagely.

“You were paid for that.”

Jerry gave a hoot of laughter. Branscombe had forgotten that sound; it made him shiver.

“Now, see here!” he began, but without that heart-warming anger now; this was only bluster. “See here! I made a certain definite agreement with you, and I’ve fulfilled my part of it. I expect you to do likewise. I—How did you get here, anyhow?”

“I took the number of your car,” said Jerry. “You must of expected *that*. You must of known you’d see me again, all right. Gimme a cigarette, mister?”

Branscombe marvelled at his own stupidity in having so easily taken it for granted that he was done with Jerry, that Jerry would be satisfied with twenty-five dollars. He marvelled that he had ever thought of Jerry as a sort of idiot, to be managed without any difficulty.

“Gimme a cigarette, mister?”

He took out his silver case and opened it. And he saw how Jerry looked at the case, and how Jerry looked at him. He understood very well what was going to happen to him. He was going to be blackmailed.

“Well ...” he said, “if you’ve come to beg, I’ll give you a few dollars.”

A curious change came over Jerry. His lean body straightened, lost its scarecrow limpness; his hollow face had no longer that half-idiotic vagueness; he looked tense and alive, and horribly dangerous.

“O.K.!” he said. “If you want to hold out on me, I won’t bother with you. There’s someone else will pay, without no kick.”

“The only way to deal with a blackmailer,” thought Branscombe, “is to refuse from the very beginning. Never give him one penny. He won’t dare to go to the police. He’s too much implicated.... State’s evidence ...? Isn’t there some arrangement by which a criminal can secure immunity by giving important evidence ...? He could say that at first he believed my story of an accident.... But he won’t want to do that. He’d have nothing to gain. The police wouldn’t pay him anything. This is—only bluff. If I stand firm—”

“*She’ll pay,*” said Jerry.

“Who?”

“Oh, his wife,” said Jerry, casually.

“What—what do you mean?” cried Branscombe.

“Patrell’s wife. She hasn’t got so much, but she’d pay all she could. She’d figure you done it for her sake, see? And she wouldn’t want you to burn for it. She’d pay, all right.”

“God damn you! If you go near her—!”

“Jeese!” said Jerry. “Now you look like a killer, all right! First, I didn’t see how you’d ever have the guts to kill a guy. But now I see it.”

Branscombe turned away his head. A killer.... Was that fury he had felt rising in him now the same thing that he had felt in the wood ...?

“What’s happening to me?” he thought, in wonder and fear. “I’ve always been quiet and self-controlled.... It’s—it must be the circumstances.... I’ve got to keep my head.”

No doubt about that. He would have to use subtlety in dealing with Jerry. And his mind instantly responded to his need; he saw the course he must follow. He must confirm Jerry’s idea that he was a man to be feared.

“You’d better be thankful I’m not a ‘killer,’ ” he said, with sort of contemptuous good humour. “Or I’d have finished you off before this.”

“I’d see you didn’t get no chance.”

“I had a chance,” said Branscombe. “I had a gun with me yesterday. I could have put a bullet through you when you came out of that barn, and no one would ever have been the wiser.”

Jerry glanced at him sidelong, and Branscombe’s heart leaped, with a sense of triumph new to him. He felt that, in spite of his inexperience, he was capable of dealing with this fellow.

“How did you find out the—the man’s name?” he asked.

“I got ways of finding out things,” said Jerry. “Never mind about that. Do I get a job, or don’t I?”

“You don’t. If you’re in need I can spare you a little cash
—”

“Not good enough.”

“Yes. It’s good enough,” said Branscombe. “You’ve taken me by surprise. I haven’t made up my mind yet how to deal with you. I’ll give you a few dollars so that I can get rid of you for a time, while I think this over. And make up my mind what to do about you.”

Again Jerry gave him that uneasy sidelong glance.

“Well ... O.K ...” he said. “I’ll give you a chance to think it over. And you’ll see that you got to help me out.”

“I might—see something else,” said Branscombe.

He took a ten-dollar bill from his pocket, and Jerry went off with it.

“I’ll be seein’ you,” said Jerry. “To-morrow. And I got to have money to-morrow.”

“I can manage him!” thought Branscombe. “I’m equal to this situation. And to any other....”

CHAPTER X

He decided that, for the moment, he would make no definite plan about Jerry.

“Or about Blanche,” he thought. “They’re both all right for the present. And I’m tired.”

Hilda, too, need not worry him now.

“She’ll be going to see her precious husband to-morrow,” he thought. “Then she’ll come home and brood over the thing, trying to decide what’s right.”

He felt an increasing resentment against Hilda.

“In a way, she’s responsible,” he thought. “Morally responsible for the whole thing. She’s not a fool. When I came to see her, day after day, she must have known I was—to say the least—strongly attracted to her. Yet she kept on being so encouraging. Anyone could imagine the shock it was to find out that she was a married woman. Under the influence of an emotion like that—”

He had killed Patrell because of jealousy. He had killed Patrell to protect Hilda. He had killed Patrell in self-defence. He was ready to admit any motive, any passion, except that one which he refused to remember. He *would not* believe in the blind terror and fury which had made him go on battering the creature he had, by accident, struck down. So unbearable was the truth that he could never acknowledge it.

Jerry and Blanche and Hilda would all leave him alone for a few hours, and he would use the respite for the rest he so badly needed. He would do no thinking.

“I’ll drive Eva to Marlowe Beach to-morrow,” he told himself. “We’ll spend the day there—a swim—lunch at the

hotel.”

The thought of a long day in the open air with his faithful companion made him sigh with relief. For that one day he would relax, and feel safe. After all, Eva was the one person who never worried him or irritated him.

He dressed, and went into the dining-room to shake up the mild cocktails he and Eva occasionally drank before dinner. She joined him there, and he looked with a new gentleness at her pretty face, her cheerful, absent-minded smile. His one friend....

“If the weather’s favourable,” he said, “I thought we might drive over to Marlowe Beach to-morrow morning.”

She was always so very pleased to go anywhere with him, at any time. It was incredible to see that this time she was not. Her smile became anxious; the colour rose in her cheeks.

“Well ... Could we go in the afternoon, Andy?”

“Why?”

“I told Lew Evans I’d go canoeing with him in the morning.” Her eyes were fixed on her brother’s face. “Andy, I’d love to go to the beach with you, only—”

“Very well!” he said, and knew he must not reproach her.

He felt stricken. As they sat at dinner together, he kept glancing at her: he remembered his father’s dying words to him: “Look after Eva....” He had looked after her. He remembered what an engaging little girl she had been, and how greatly she had admired her older brother.... Never yet had she rebelled against any of his edicts; sometimes she argued, but he had always been able to convince her that he was right. He was sure that, if he made a point of her coming

with him to-morrow, she would do so, but he was afraid to try.

“Perhaps I’m mistaken,” he thought. “Perhaps she’s not really interested in that fellow at all. And if she is, it can’t be serious. She’s only seen him a few times; she doesn’t know anything about him. She’s always been very reasonable about giving up other—undesirable acquaintances....”

“Andy!” she said suddenly. “What’s the matter?”

Their eyes met. The sky was still pale, a melancholy grey; the candles on the table wavered in the breeze; it seemed to him strangely sad here, and lonely. Only Eva and himself.... And did her face look white ...?

“Andy! What’s the matter?” she repeated, with insistence.

“The matter? Why? Why do you ask that?” he demanded uneasily.

“You looked so queer....”

“That’s not very polite,” he said, with a frown. “How do I look ‘queer’?”

“I don’t know. I guess you really didn’t. It was just the light.”

“I insist upon knowing how I looked ‘queer.’ ”

She laughed, her sweet, careless laugh.

“Oh, Andy, I don’t know! It was nothing. Some shadow, or something, on your face made you look—different for a moment.”

“Different in what way?”

“I don’t *know!*” she said, laughing again. “Do let’s drop it!”

“No,” he said, stiffly. “I don’t like to look ‘queer.’ ”

“Well, you don’t, any more.”

“Exactly how did I look ‘different’?”

He had to know. He could not afford to look “queer,” or “different.” What Eva noticed other people might notice, too. “A queer change in Branscombe....”

“It was just that you looked—well—brooding,” she said. Then it occurred to him that he could turn this incident to good account. He was surprised by the idea which came to him so easily.

“As far as that goes,” he said, “I am worried. Very much worried.”

“What about, you poor lamb?”

“You,” he said.

“Me? But, Andy—!”

“You have confidence in me, haven’t you, Eva?”

“Oh, tons, Andy!” she assured him.

“If you could just take my word for something, Eva, and not ask for an explanation—”

“I could, Andy!”

“I want to ask you not to see any more of that Evans fellow.”

She said nothing. And that was unbearable. She sat there, across the table from him.... People talked about reading faces, but he could read nothing in this face, so familiar to him. She did not look angry, or startled; she was just silent, as if she had not heard.

“I asked you—” he began.

“Andy, I can’t—do that,” she said, unsteadily.

“Why can’t you?”

“Because—I like him.”

This was worse than he had feared. He needed her so much just now; she could not turn away from him to a stranger.

“Eva,” he said, “I’m sorry. I’m very sorry. But I shouldn’t have asked you to do this, if I hadn’t had good reason.”

“You see, Andy, I know him better than you do. I’ve talked to him—quite a lot, lately.... If you did know him, you’d like him. He’s the kind of person you do like. He’s intelligent and he’s—nice—”

“You’re mistaken,” said Branscombe, filled with a great fear. “You’re young and inexperienced. You don’t know—”

“I know about him.”

Her voice was gentle as always, but there was in it a quiet resolution he had never heard there before. There was danger, serious danger, that he would lose her.

“Eva,” he said, “I hate to tell you this.... But I’ve found out something about Evans.... Please don’t ask me to tell you.... Please take my word for it that—he’s not fit for you to know.”

“I couldn’t—take your word about that, Andy,” she said, winking away the tears that had risen in her eyes.

Again inspiration came to him.

“I hate to tell you this,” he said. “But I’ve got to. When I saw that you were—getting friendly with Evans, I made some enquiries.... Only this morning I—saw this woman he’s been living with.”

“Andy, I can’t—”

“It’s true, Eva! She calls herself his wife. I found her in a second-rate boarding-house. An untidy, disgusting room,

reeking with cheap perfume and tobacco smoke.... There she was, in some sort of dressing-gown—her hair not brushed.... She admitted that she called herself his wife.... She was in debt to the landlady; she didn't know when her—lover was coming back, and he'd left her without a penny. She cried.... It was nauseating! I suppose she's pretty—in a way—but slovenly—utterly lacking in character.... I paid her rent for her.”

Eva had risen; she stood with one hand on the back of her chair, her eyes fastened on her brother's face. And in her eyes he saw not anger, not defiance or incredulity, but a shocked misery. He had never before lied to her, and she believed him now. Certainly he had spoken with conviction, seeing the image of Blanche before him.

“Had he—left her, Andy?”

“She was expecting him back. She hadn't the least resentment toward him for going off and leaving her penniless.... I suppose she takes that sort of treatment for granted. A slovenly, lazy hussy.... Her fingers were stained with nicotine.... There were a lot of cheap magazines about the place.... She was still in bed when I got there, at eleven in the morning....”

“I'm—glad you paid her rent,” said Eva.

“One feels more or less sorry for such women,” said Branscombe. “This one—Blanche, her name was—seems quite young....”

He had been inspired; there was no doubt of that. All these details gave it reality.

“Ordinarily,” he went on, “I shouldn't particularly blame Evans. When I first met him, he impressed me as a—a

sensual type. And as I said, the girl's rather pretty. Easy-going, I imagine, and amiable. I'm a man of the world. Such affairs don't shock, or even interest me. But when it concerns a man with whom you're friendly ... I think you'll admit that I'm a pretty good judge of character. You remember how I was the first one to spot that card sharper on the ship? I'd already formed my opinion of Evans—but after talking to this girl Blanche, I saw—other characteristics in him.... Distinctly more unpleasant.”

“Excuse me if I go upstairs, Andy.”

He was sorry for her. But he meant to make up to her for all this.

“And she'll get over it,” he thought. “It can't amount to anything much. The fellow's practically a stranger to her.”

He rose, too.

“Of course, what I've just said is absolutely confidential, Eva. Technically speaking, I had no business prying into the man's private affairs. I'm glad I did so, though.... You see, don't you, that it mustn't be mentioned—to anyone?”

“Yes. I see ...” she said.

When she had gone, he went into the library and stretched himself out comfortably in his chair. He was sorry for Eva, but beneath that superficial regret he was well content. Eva wouldn't leave him. As soon as he had thought of a way to manage Jerry and Blanche, he and Eva would go away, on a long cruise. He wasn't going to lose his one ally and friend.

CHAPTER XI

He would not have been surprised if Eva had remained in her room the next day; in fact, he was a little startled to see her appear at breakfast looking just as usual, cheerful, careless, and pretty.

“She doesn’t really care for the fellow,” he thought.

But then another thought came to him. He himself showed no outward sign of what he had endured, and was enduring. He had killed a man—and his hand was steady when he shaved; he ate a good breakfast. He and Eva sat here together, as they had sat a hundred, a thousand times; they knew each other better, perhaps, than they knew any other human beings. Yet she had no suspicion of his horrible secret, and it might well be that he knew as little of what was in her heart. It gave him a feeling of chill and bitter isolation. This thing that burdened him could *never* be shared. All the rest of his life he would have this loneliness....

Very well, he could stand it.

“I’m driving in to New York—on business,” he said.
“Anything I can do for you, Eva?”

“Oh, just bring me back a diamond necklace!” she said.

He went into an obscure little stationer’s in the Bronx and bought a box of cheap writing-paper; he went to one of the large hotels downtown and in the lounge he copied the letter he had composed, addressed it to Hilda, and posted it. Then

he went to another hotel and had a very nice little lunch and a half-bottle of Sauterne.

His brain was working well. That letter would keep Hilda from making a search for Patrell at present. Blanche would be resigned to waiting for a few days. Eva was safe now. There were only two people who worried him seriously; Colton and Jerry.

“Hilda can keep Colton quiet,” he thought. “If he’s uneasy about Patrell’s absence the letter may satisfy him.”

But he wasn’t sure about that. He did not know whether Hilda was likely to show the letter to Colton, or to talk to him at all about her husband. He did not know how intimate Colton and Patrell might have been, how much Colton might know about Patrell’s affairs and Patrell’s character. Perhaps it was entirely out of keeping with Patrell’s nature to go to Montreal with Blanche; perhaps he had had important engagements that would have made it impossible for him to have gone. Perhaps Patrell’s absence at this moment would be astounding—to God knew how many people.

“If enquiries are made,” thought Branscombe, “if our meeting is discovered, I’ll simply have to tell my story and take the chance. I’ll say he took the money I gave him and went away.”

How was he to explain that he had been carrying with him a sum of money sufficient to satisfy Patrell? An investigation would disclose the fact that he had not drawn any considerable amount from the bank for days.

“I’ll say I gave him a post-dated cheque. On condition that he left the country.... That’s not a good explanation, though. He’d have trouble in cashing my personal cheque in some place where I wasn’t known.... But it’s the best I can do....”

He might, with luck and skill, keep Colton quiet. But Jerry would never be satisfied. He could not be bought off, for no matter what he was given he would come back for more.

“I’ll have to make some temporary arrangement with him,” he thought, “until I think of a plan, or until something happens. Plenty of things could happen to him. He’s a criminal type. He might be sent to prison. He might be shot by one of his—associates. I wish to God he would be! If I’d lived four hundred years ago, in Cellini’s day, the problem would have been simple—I’d have paid some bravo to get rid of him. I’d do that now, if I could. I’d have no scruples whatever about doing away with a rat like that.”

It was odd, he thought, that a man of his position in the world should have such ideas.

“By temperament,” he thought, “I belong to the Renaissance, not to the present.”

A man of strong passions, of daring, of subtlety.... A man who combined within himself a love of the arts, scholarship, and a capacity for swift, ruthless action.... There was a mirror in the wall of the restaurant; he saw his own face there, and found in it something secret and dangerous, and he was reassured.

When he drove home after lunch he experimented a little. He drove faster than was his habit, much faster; he did not show his usual formal courtesy to other drivers. It exhilarated him. Reaching his own place, he turned sharply into the drive, swept past a man who was loitering there.

He knew who that man was, although he was so greatly changed. He wore a light grey suit, which made him look less slight; he was erect; he was no scarecrow now. There was a sort of swagger about him; with his olive skin, his

sleek black hair, his narrow eyes, he was handsome in his own vicious fashion. He came toward the house, and Branscombe stood there waiting for him. These new clothes had been bought with Branscombe's money; the fellow's swagger was based upon Branscombe's helplessness....

"You can't hang around here!" he said. "Get out!" And in his anger forgot for a moment that he must be careful.

"Oke, I'll hang around somewhere else," said Jerry.

Again and again Jerry would come back. No end to this....

"Just came in my head I'd ask was there anything I could do for you," Jerry went on. "And I thought it would suit you better for me to hang around than if I was to go up to the house and ring the bell. Anyways, I forgot to bring my calling cards."

He laughed, and it was the same shrill hoot.

"Stop that!" commanded Branscombe.

"Stop what? Laughing? Can't a guy even laugh if something strikes him funny?"

"You've got a laugh like a hyena," said Branscombe.

"Don't you realize that anyone who heard you or saw you with me would know there was something wrong? Would know that I couldn't possibly have any legitimate business with a cheap little cur like you?"

It was a horrible thing that Jerry showed no resentment; it was as if Branscombe's contempt and hatred were utterly negligible.

"That's all right about me being a hyena," he said, unruffled. "Maybe you got reasons for not being glad to see me. But let me tell you I met dames as high-hat as you—real

society girls and all, and they didn't think I was no hyena. You'd be surprised! I got them hypnotised."

Branscombe stared at him, the shadow of an idea, still formless, rising in his mind.

"So the girls like you?" he said slowly.

"Do they like me!" said Jerry.

"If that's the case ..." said Branscombe, "there may be a little job you can do for me...."

Jerry was silent; he asked no questions, only waited.

"I'll let you know later," said Branscombe. "Now clear out! I don't want the whole neighbourhood talking."

"Got a ten-spot to spare, mister?"

"No!" said Branscombe. He had to make some sort of stand against the fellow. He couldn't simply hand him whatever he wanted. "I gave you money yesterday."

"And you'll gimme more to-day. I got to have it."

"Has it occurred to you," asked Branscombe, "that if you drive me too far, you'll get nothing?"

"Why, I haven't even started yet," said Jerry. And suddenly his narrow face was so evil, so fierce that Branscombe recoiled. He gave him the money. He had to yield. He would never be able to refuse the fellow, would never be free from him and his demands. Never.

He turned away and entered the house. When the housemaid spoke to him he could have shouted at her. He wanted to be let alone....

"Well?" he said.

"Mrs. Patrell telephoned, sir. She asked would you come over to tea at four, sir. She said never mind about letting her

know, sir, but if you'd just come....”

He looked at the girl with a frown that disconcerted her. He didn't want to go to Hilda's—and talk.

“But if I don't go,” he thought, “I'll have to ring her up and explain. I'll have to go sooner or later, anyhow. It may as well be now.”

He changed into another suit; he saw that he looked neat, correct, a little forbidding; and he thought that perhaps an aloof attitude would be as good as another. He had every right to be aloof, unhappy, honourably restrained. It would at least avert the possibility of an emotional scene, and that was what he dreaded most. For there was no sentiment in him now, no tenderness, nothing but a miserable preoccupation with his monstrous problems.

Her drawing-room had once been a haven of peace to him; he entered it this afternoon in a mood of fatigued annoyance. And Colton was there.

Branscombe had not expected this; he was greatly affronted; he greeted Hilda with stiff formality, and Colton only with a nod. There was, in the atmosphere, the same constraint that had marked their former meeting.

“Captain Colton has found such a nice little cottage ...” said Hilda.

Neither of the men said anything, and Hilda seemed to find conversation very difficult. The house-maid brought in tea; she asked the necessary questions about lemon or cream and sugar; there were long pauses....

“What the devil did she ask me here for—with this fellow?” thought Branscombe. “If she can't even be civil....”

Then an idea came to him which turned him cold. Suppose she were angry at him?... She had said she was going to see Patrell this morning. Suppose she had gone to Mrs. Hawkes's, and had—found out something? He could imagine plenty of things she might have found out. That hussy might have gone back there; Hilda might have seen her, talked to her. If Hilda had got a description of “Mr. Brown,” she might put two and two together. She might remember how Branscombe had asked for Patrell's address. She might be waiting for Colton to go, so that she could turn upon Branscombe, reproach him, accuse him....

“I won't stand it!” he thought. “I'll deny everything! She can't prove that I was Brown. She has no right to reproach me, anyhow—no claim on me—”

Colton rose.

“Well ...” he said, with a sort of vague amiability. “I'll be getting along. Sorry I didn't see Coralie.... Better luck next time, I hope.... Good-bye!”

“Good-bye!” said Hilda and Branscombe in chorus.

The door closed after him and still Hilda did not smile or speak. It was intolerable.

“You asked me to come—?” said Branscombe.

“I didn't know Vincent was coming.... I thought it would be nice—to have a little chat with you.”

“She doesn't know how to have a ‘nice little chat,’ ” thought Branscombe, annoyed. “She's altogether too naive for a woman her age.... She makes it obvious that something's upset her. No poise.”

“I—went this morning to see Charles ...” she said.

“Yes....”

“I told you why I was going,” she went on. “To talk to him about Coralie.... To make—a definite arrangement.... But he’s gone to Montreal.”

“I see!” said Branscombe. But he couldn’t “see” anything at all; he could not tell from her face or her tone whether Mrs. Hawkes had mentioned Blanche to her or not. Perhaps she knew, and pride kept her silent. He had to know what she intended to do, though.

“So you’ll wait, I suppose ...” he said. “You’ll take no steps until he comes back?”

“I don’t know,” she answered. “There are circumstances that—I’d rather not talk about, Andrew. But they’ve made me decide that there’s no use in trying to talk to Charles.”

“I thought all the time that it was a mistake.”

“I know.... I realize that now.”

“What will you do, then?”

“Nothing, just now,” she answered. “I don’t want to make any plans, or even to think about it for a little while. It was—very upsetting.... And then for Vincent to come.... Of course, I know very well what’s in his mind.”

“What is?”

“He’d never change. He’s still hoping to reconcile us, I’m sure. And when I think that, being such a close friend of Charles’s, he must know about these—these circumstances, and still he wants me to overlook everything.... I can’t help resenting it.”

“Quite properly so.”

“No,” she said. “I shouldn’t. Vincent is absolutely honourable. Only, his behaviour seems so—*strange*. Coming

here, all of a sudden, after all these years.... And not saying anything, not even mentioning Charles's name....”

Strange ...? So strange that it sent a chill along Branscombe's spine.

“I'm sorry I've been so stupid,” she said. “Everything's been so upsetting....” She smiled; she wanted to atone now, to be friendly and cheerful with him. But he pretended he had to hurry home, to take a telephone call that was coming from Chicago; he invented a great many details about it.

What he really wanted was to be alone, and to think about the “strangeness” of Patrell's friend, Captain Colton.

CHAPTER XII

He was in a hurry to get home to lock himself into the library and think about Colton. And, to his surprise, he found that he was also in a hurry for a drink.

“I’ve never been a drinking man,” he thought. “But then, I’ve never been so worried.”

Directly upon entering the house he went to the dining-room and poured himself a whisky. It comforted him at once; he felt steadier. He was pouring himself another when the house-maid spoke to him from the doorway; he was startled, he was ashamed and angry that she should see him drinking in this hurried, stealthy way.

“What is it?” he demanded, sharply.

“Excuse me, sir, but Mr. Evans is here to see you.”

If it had been possible, Branscombe would have run away. It seemed to him that he *could not* face Evans. But he had to face him—and everyone and everything else.

“Show him into the library,” he said, and when the girl had gone he swallowed his second drink.

“May be nothing but an ordinary call,” he said to himself. But he did not believe it. And as soon as he saw the young man, he knew it was going to be bad. Evans stood in the centre of the room; his dark face was ominous; he did not smile; he gave no greeting.

“I’d like to speak to you, Branscombe.”

“Very well, I’m here.”

“It’s about your sister. Something’s happened. She won’t explain—but something’s happened to turn her against me. This morning on the beach she avoided me. I telephoned to

her this afternoon to ask when I could see her. And she said—she expected to be very busy, and couldn't make any engagements.”

“Yes?” said Branscombe. “Is that all?”

“She wasn't like that yesterday.”

“That's too bad,” said Branscombe coolly. “But I don't quite see what you expect me to do. Have you never heard of a girl changing her mind?”

“She's not that sort of girl.”

“And—” Branscombe went on, more and more openly hostile, “it's never occurred to you that perhaps she simply doesn't like you?”

“Yes,” said Evans. “That's occurred to me. But in that case she wouldn't behave like this. She wouldn't be friendly with me one day, and then drop me without any sort of explanation. She's—not like that.”

“Perhaps you've been making rather a nuisance of yourself,” said Branscombe.

It had come into his head that the way to handle this fellow was to provoke him, humiliate him, make him behave with a violence that would dismay Eva. But Evans had a remarkable—and alarming—self-control.

“No,” he said, “I haven't. I wasn't—troublesome to her, and she didn't dislike me. Until to-day. Something's happened. And it's pretty obvious what it is. Someone's been lying to her about me.”

“She couldn't have had much confidence in you, if she'd believe the first thing—”

“There's only one person she'd believe,” said Evans.

Their eyes met. And Branscombe saw that he had made a mistake. In his supremely difficult position, he had made an enemy for himself, and a dangerous enemy. He decided to change his tactics, but not too obviously, too suddenly.

“Do you mean me, Evans?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Evans.

“I suppose I ought to feel insulted,” said Branscombe, lighting a cigarette. “And I can’t say I’m not seriously annoyed at your implication. But I’m making allowances for you. A man in your emotional condition is never reasonable.”

“I’m reasonable,” said Evans. And, unfortunately, he was.

“No,” said Branscombe. “Later, when you’ve come to your senses, you’ll see how preposterous it was for you to come here and accuse me of God knows what, simply because a young girl has changed her mind. Or you imagine she’s changed her mind. It’s very likely that she never meant to encourage you.”

“I think,” said Evans, “that I’ll say what I meant to say. Of course, as soon as I saw you, I knew you were a stuffed shirt —”

“Look here!”

“I’m looking,” said Evans. “I saw, in the beginning, what you were doing to Eva. Ruining her life. Keeping her shut away from the world, no friends, no amusements— everything arranged to suit *you*. Everything *your* way. Naturally you don’t want to lose her. You’ll never find anyone else on earth who’d be so patient and so unexacting. But you’re going to lose her.”

“You’re raving!” said Branscombe contemptuously. “Are you trying to pretend that Eva’s a prisoner—that she’s ill-used?”

“Her life’s being wasted,” said Evans. “And that’s about the worst thing that can be done to anyone. She was beginning to like me, and that’s not going to be stopped by you. You’ve said something to her that turned her against me. Either you’ll unsay it, or I’ll show you up to her some day, Branscombe. Take my word for that.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re more than just the ordinary stuffed shirt,” said Evans. “More than a fool. You’re dangerous.”

“Dangerous, eh?”

“It’s written in your face,” said Evans.

It seemed to Branscombe that in the other’s black eyes there was a strange and terrible knowledge; it was as if Evans looked into his spirit....

“What—are you going to accuse me of to my sister?” he asked.

“I don’t know yet,” said Evans. “But I’m going to find out.”

“Get out!” said Branscombe.

Evans turned on his heel and walked off, without another word. And Branscombe stumbled into a chair behind his desk, sat there, staring at nothing.

He did not see how he could have handled Evans in any better fashion. All he could do was to get the fellow out of the house. Certainly he could not have argued with him. He had had to pretend that the charges against him were

preposterous, and he must keep to that course, as long as he could.

As long as he could. But he had seen in Evans a passionate determination that was not to be deflected.

“He wants to take Eva away from me,” he thought. “If he does.... That’s one thing I couldn’t stand.”

He heard Eva’s light, quick step in the hall, and he groaned to himself. No one would let him *alone*. He had no peace, no time for thinking, for the vitally necessary planning. He would have to face Eva now, without a moment’s respite.

She stood in the doorway; as he raised his eyes to her face he was too dejected to attempt a smile.

“Andy—” she said. “Lew Evans came to see you ...?”

He felt like an exhausted swimmer, trying again and again to reach the shore, and again and again flung back into the maelstrom. He couldn’t answer. But she repeated her question and, with an immense effort, he selected an attitude.

“Yes,” he said. “It was—very unpleasant. If you don’t mind, Eva, I’d rather not talk about it.”

“I’d like to know, Andy.”

“He came here to accuse me of making trouble between you and him. He said that you had changed your manner toward him, and that he was certain I was responsible for this.” He paused a moment. “Then, of course, I was obliged to tell him what I’d found out—about that woman. I’d—rather not go on, Eva.”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to know, Andy.”

“He threatened to retaliate. He said he’d tell you something about me that would destroy any influence I may have with you. I didn’t even ask him what the story was that

he was going to tell you about me.... I tried to make allowances for him—but I did warn him that if he goes spreading scandal about me—”

“He’s not like that.”

“I wish you could have heard him this afternoon. You’d have got a new light on his disposition.”

“Well ...” she said, and tried to speak casually, but tears filled her eyes, and her lip trembled. “Well, anyhow, I’m sure he wouldn’t really try to tell me any sort of lie about you.”

“I hope he won’t. I don’t mind telling you that I lost my temper when he said that. I told him to go ahead, and be damned.”

“He—probably didn’t mean it. Dinner’s ready, Andy.”

She was taking the thing remarkably well, he thought; he admired her courage, and still more did he admire her loyalty to himself.

“Now if he tries to—talk against me,” he thought, “she simply won’t listen.”

After dinner he and Eva sat on the veranda in the summer dark, smoking, talking very little. He thought of the extraordinary, the utterly unforeseen complications of this affair, and of the resourcefulness with which he had met them.

“There are elements in my nature which I never suspected ...” he thought. “I might have done so much.... But I’ve wasted my life until now....”

A great hunger and thirst for life, vigorous, exciting life, filled him. He intended to waste no more time.

CHAPTER XIII

Having gone to bed early, Blanche waked early. She lay quiet for a time, looking about her at the neat, comfortable little room, then, with considerable hesitation, she lifted the telephone receiver.

“Well.... What time is breakfast, please?” she asked.

“Do you wish it served in your room, madam?” asked a polite voice.

That had not occurred to her, but she did wish it served in her room, and she enjoyed that meal very greatly. She felt so luxurious, sitting up in bed, with a little table beside her; she lit a cigarette when she had poured out her second cup of coffee, and she thought how different this was from Mrs. Hawkes’s. She and Charlie had used to make their own coffee there, and Hawkes used to smell it and make a row, because cooking wasn’t allowed in the rooms.

“Still, it was fun,” she thought. “I miss Charlie a terrible lot.... I’d rather be back there with him than here without him.”

She got up to fetch an ash-tray. Cigarette ashes made dish-washing harder.

“I hope Charlie’ll come to-day,” she thought. “I wish he’d of told me he was going away, so I could’ve said good-bye.”

It made her unhappy to think that she had parted from him without any special word or caress, just a kiss and a careless, “I’ll be seeing you.”

“If I’d known he was in any kind of trouble,” she thought, “I’d of said something—more loving....”

She did not know what to do with herself. She felt a profound gratitude to Charlie for sending her to this nice place, and she wanted to be a credit to him. She dressed hours earlier than usual and went down into the lounge, sat there, very neat, quiet, secretly uneasy. Two old ladies were there, and a young man reading a newspaper; she wondered if they thought she was “queer.” She was afraid one of the old ladies might ask her questions....

By noon she was thoroughly bored and melancholy; she ate her solitary lunch and thought of her one recreation, the movies. She had enough money to go to a cheap one, but would it be all right?

“Maybe I’d ought to say something to the man at the desk,” she thought, and in the end she did so. “I’m just going out to a show,” she told the clerk. “In case anybody asks for me.”

She saw a picture that made her cry; when she returned to the hotel she was thoroughly depressed, and even the good dinner she had could not console her.

“I feel like something’s happened to Charlie,” she thought. “I don’t care what people say, I believe there’s a lot in things like that. In feelings, and dreams.... If anything happened to Charlie, wouldn’t it be natural for me to kind of feel it, when I care for him such a lot?”

She bought another magazine, but it did not hold her interest. She lay in bed and thought about Charlie.

“It must be true about his being in trouble,” she thought. “I know he wouldn’t take up with another girl, and I know he wouldn’t just walk out on me. Anyways, look at all the money he must of left with Mr. Brown, for me to stay here.”

She thought about Mr. Brown, but without interest.

“He’s a funny kind of a fellow.”

That was all. It was Charlie who filled her mind.

She breakfasted in bed again the next morning, and went downstairs early, to ask for letters. And when there were none, a sudden impulse came to her.

“How do I know that Mr. Brown was all right?” she thought. “I didn’t like him.... Maybe it’s all some kind of a plot, or something. I mean, maybe he just wanted to get me away from Charlie, and Charlie’d come back to Hawkes’s and not find me.”

The idea terrified her. She knew so well how slight a thing was the bond between them. She loved Patrell, she trusted him blindly, yet he was a stranger to her. She knew nothing about his family, his business, his past life; if he did not come back to her there was no possible way in which she could reach him. It was as if he had appeared from nowhere, had taken her hand, and led her off to Mrs. Hawkes’s. If he vanished now, what could she do?

“It could be a plot!” she cried to herself in a panic.

For her it was not at all necessary to be logical. She did not even try to imagine why there should be a “plot” to separate her from Patrell. She loved him, and she was afraid, and she did what came into her head. She took the subway uptown and went to a tea-room, where she had often lunched. There was a waitress there with whom she was friendly, an English girl named Queenie.

“Listen, Queenie!” she said. “When you go off to-night, will you stop at Mrs. Hawkes’s, and ask is there any mail or any message or anything for me or Charlie? I’ve left there

and I'm afraid things maybe have gone wrong.... Maybe Charlie'll be there himself. If he is, see him, will you, and tell him I'll be waiting in the corner drug-store."

"Rightie-oh!" said Queenie.

"I'll be waiting in the drug-store for you, anyways—to see if there's any letters. And maybe Charlie'll come with you."

She returned to the hotel, and now she was hopeful; now she felt certain that Queenie would find Charlie at Mrs. Hawkes's, and that in a few hours she would see him. How interested he would be in the strange story of Mr. Brown!

"It's funny, too, in a way," she thought. "Charlie's often been away longer than this, and I never felt so bad. I never felt worried, like this."

Queenie left the tea-room at seven; allow her fifteen minutes to get to Mrs. Hawkes's, ten minutes there, and ten to reach the drug-store.

"No use to get to the drug-store till around half-past seven," thought Blanche.

But she was there before seven.

"Waiting for Queenie," she told the soda-clerk.

He was a nice boy; she liked him. Whenever he was at leisure, he came and chatted with her, and she was glad, for with every passing moment she grew more and more nervous. If only, only she could see Charlie come walking in at the door...

But Queenie came alone, Queenie with her curly, coppery hair, her fair skin, her little knitted hat and silk coat that were at the same time saucy and completely lacking in style.

"There was just one letter for him, dearie," she said. "Nothing for you, and Hawkes said he hadn't been in. You'd

better be looking out for another boy.”

“Charlie’s all right,” said Blanche.

“All men are alike,” said Queenie.

Blanche did not believe that Charlie was like other men. She took the letter that had come addressed to him and went back to the hotel, cruelly disappointed at not having seen him.

“Well, of course, maybe what that Mr. Brown said was true,” she thought. “Maybe he really did have to go away, and he’ll write to me when it’s safe.”

She examined the envelope. It was nice paper, she noticed, and nice, clear handwriting. It looked like a woman’s writing.... There was a suburban post-mark on it....

“It could be his sister, or someone,” she thought. “I don’t know if he’s got a sister.... Well, suppose it is from some other girl? He must of known plenty of other girls before he met me. That’s nothing.”

She wanted to know what was in the letter. Not because she was jealous, or suspicious, but because she was lonely and uneasy, and so greatly wanted some sort of contact with his life.

“I’ll say I thought the envelope said ‘missis,’ ” she decided.

She had no ethical scruples about opening the letter, no sense of disloyalty to Patrell. She thought that even if he were to know that she had read his letter, he wouldn’t mind much, if she didn’t make a row. She tore open the envelope, and the first words gave her a shock.

“Dear Daddy—”

“Oh, my Lord!” she cried to herself. “I didn’t ever imagine —”

She went on reading.

DEAR DADDY:

I thought I would see you yesterday in the woods, but as I did not, I thought I would write you a few lines. I wish you would not mind if I told Mother about seeing you. I think if I could talk to her and explain things, she would see you herself and everything would be arranged. There are reasons which I can not explain but I think you ought to see her *right away*, or else it may be too late. If you will just drop me a line and say you do not mind if I tell her I have seen you, I think I can easily persuade her to have a talk with you and everything will then come out all right.

The weather is very pleasant and the garden looks lovely.

Hoping to hear from you soon,

Your loving daughter

CORALIE.

In dismay, in confusion, Blanche studied this letter from another world. Charlie had a wife and a child, and they wanted him back. She would never have dreamed of disputing their right to him; she never thought that she had any claim on him. Only, she loved him. And, in her vague, aimless life she had nothing else but him.

What she did was the classic thing for a girl in her situation to do. She did it on impulse, as usual. She wanted to see Charlie’s home. She hoped she might catch a glimpse of Charlie’s wife, to see if she was pretty.

She had no thought of making trouble for him; she was without malice. She copied out the address on Coralie's letter with a heart like lead.

CHAPTER XIV

Branscombe waked in the morning feeling wonderfully well and alert. He lay in bed for a time, thinking of the complications he must confront, but he was certain he could meet any situation that might develop.

“And that’s the only way,” he thought. “No use trying to take too long a view in a case like this. I’ll deal with things—as they arise. I’ve managed pretty well so far. In the beginning, though—No, in the beginning I didn’t do so well.”

He thought how much better he could do now, with his new self-assurance and resourcefulness.

“My great mistake,” he thought, “just about my only mistake, was in having anything to do with Jerry. If I’d simply knocked him down and driven on, he wouldn’t have made serious trouble for me. In the first place, I don’t think he’d have dared to go to the police. And if he had, I’d simply have denied his story that there was—anything in the car. Dam’ dirty blackmailer! I wish to God I’d run the car over him and killed him the first time I ever set eyes on him!”

Death, he thought, was the only satisfactory solution for problems such as his. He wished Jerry dead, and Blanche, and Evans, and Colton. But, of course, they were not going to die, and he would have to go on managing them indefinitely. Very well! He could do it.

He found Eva in the dining-room, and she was agreeably matter-of-fact. The sun shone, the room was tranquil and gay; it was as if nothing had happened.

“What about a swim this morning?” Eva suggested. “The tide will be just right at ten.”

It was more than likely that Evans would be on the beach, and Branscombe was by no means anxious to see him. “I’d like to, Eva,” he said, “but I want to go over and see Mrs. Patrell this morning.”

That was not strictly true. He felt curiously little desire to see Hilda Patrell, but he thought it would seem odd if he discontinued his usual visits, above all now, when she was troubled and unhappy.

“She’ll get that letter this morning,” he thought. “It will upset her.”

He was very tired of her being upset. What had first drawn him to her had been her quietness, the feeling of friendly ease she had given him. And all that was gone now.

“If she talks about that letter,” he thought, “and about Patrell—”

Well, if she did, he would have to listen, and to be sympathetic. He decided to walk the two miles, and taking his hat, he set off at a leisurely pace. He was in no hurry....

His house stood in a small private park, with other select summer residences; outside this park was a flat, dusty road that led to the village. He had no sooner stepped out of the park than he met Captain Colton coming toward him.

“Morning!” said Colton, without the faintest expression in his voice or in his sunburned face.

“Good-morning!” Branscombe answered, and would have gone on, only that Colton stood in his way.

“I was going to drop in and see you.... Bit early in the day—but—well....”

From the beginning Branscombe had distrusted this man; he felt a hostility toward him which he knew he must disguise.

“Anything particular you wanted to see me about?” he asked, as amiably as he could.

“Oh ... just a chat ...” said Colton. “If you’re going to the village, I’ll walk along with you. Nice place, here, isn’t it?”

In spite of his limp, he was an excellent walker; he kept easily at Branscombe’s side.

“Your people come from somewhere up the Hudson, don’t they?” he asked.

“Yes,” Branscombe answered.

“Know the Gedneys, in Poughkeepsie?”

“I know—of them,” said Branscombe, more and more annoyed and uneasy.

“Bill Gedney was pretty hard hit when the market crashed,” said Colton. “But who wasn’t?”

This, thought Branscombe, was a most obvious and childish attempt to pump him.

“Patrell said he’d been making enquiries about me,” he thought. “Was this fellow in it with him? A scheme to get money out of me, because I was—interested in Hilda? But in that case.... Does Colton know—what happened to Patrell? Is he playing a lone hand, or does he think that Patrell is—still in it?”

He glanced at Colton again, but he could read nothing in that face.

“I’m looking around for a little sailboat,” Colton went on. “I told Coralie I’d teach her to sail. Extraordinary kid, don’t you think?”

“Very nice ...” said Branscombe.

“I mean,” said Colton, “for a kid of that age.... Most trustworthy child I’ve ever seen.”

“What do you mean by that?” thought Branscombe. And it came to him that, from now on, he must always be on his guard, always be wondering what people meant.... Had the trustworthy Coralie told this old friend of her father’s about the meeting in the wood? If that were the case, Colton would have an excellent basis for blackmail....

“Hilda used to be fond of sailing,” said Colton. “I’m sorry she’s given it up. Sorry she lives as she does.”

“I should think it was a pretty good way of living.”

“Too retired,” said Colton. “No—gaiety, y’know. Doesn’t see enough people. Fact, as far as I can find out, *you’re* about the only person she does see.”

Branscombe was seriously uneasy. He was sure that Colton had not come to see him without good reason; he was certain that Colton’s words had a meaning which eluded him.

“After all,” he said, curtly, “Mrs. Patrell is entitled to live as it suits her.”

“I don’t like it,” said Colton.

They went on in silence; they reached the village, and Branscombe hoped that his unwelcome companion would leave him. But Colton kept at his side; together they turned the corner of the street upon which Hilda’s house stood.

“If I were sure about him—” thought Branscombe.

If he were sure that Colton were his enemy he would not keep up this difficult pretence of civility. But he was far from sure; he could not understand the fellow at all, and he dared not antagonize him. Shoulder to shoulder they went along the

shady street; Branscombe opened the gate, and they went through it.

Hilda came out at once; she was wearing a pale-blue linen dress that admirably set off her blonde beauty; she was cheerful this morning; there was no sign of constraint in her manner toward Colton. That was another thing he had to wonder about; he could not dismiss it as a feminine change of mood; he could take nothing lightly any more.

“Has she seen him in the meantime?” he thought. “Has he talked to her ...?”

Her manner was the same toward both of the men, and that angered Branscombe; he turned away his head. And, standing in the street outside the house, he saw Blanche. She saw him, too; they stared at each other, and he realized she had recognized him.

At that moment something happened in his soul. For the past few days he had been preparing for this; the seeds of it had been in him in his miserably unhappy days at boarding-school. He did not recognize the thing for what it was; he was aware only of an anger against the girl that was almost beyond his control.

“She’s come here—to tell Hilda ...” he thought. “All right! Then I’ll tell Hilda what she is.”

Horrible and astonishing words came into his head. He did not mind how shocking they were; he felt that he would find an immense satisfaction in shouting them aloud, in calling the girl what she was....

He turned away from her, but it was as if he could still see her. Now she must be pushing open the gate; now she would be coming up the path, slender and slouching, in her dark

dress and wide-brimmed hat. She would accuse him, in the presence of Hilda and Colton....

Why didn't she come? Was she still standing there, staring at him? He was forced to turn again, to see what she was doing—and she had gone. The street was empty.

He looked at his watch and rose.

“If you'll excuse me—” he said. “There's—an errand I promised to do for Eva. I'd forgotten....”

He had interrupted Hilda in the middle of a sentence; he knew she was startled.

“I can't help it!” he thought. “Anyhow, I can set it right, later on. She'll believe anything.”

He hurried down the street, and turned the corner. But there was no sign of Blanche. He could not retrace his steps, past Hilda's house again, to look for her in the other direction.

“If she goes to Hilda, I'll hear of it soon enough,” he thought. “But perhaps the sight of me there frightened her off for a time.”

She would return, though. She would identify him as “Mr. Brown.” She would ruin everything—if she got a chance. He would not be ruined by her. He must think of some way to stop her.... He went to the station and got a taxi; he drove home in a rage that made him sick.

Jerry was waiting for him.

CHAPTER XV

He was not alarmed, or even especially disturbed, to see Jerry. He had been harried too much.

“What do you want?” he demanded.

“It’s bad, this time,” said Jerry, in a tone of profound regret. “I’m in a lot of trouble.”

“You are?” said Branscombe. “I hate to think of you in any trouble—you damned gutter rat.”

“Here! You quit that!” said Jerry, his eyes narrow and menacing.

But Branscombe was immeasurably more menacing. His handsome face, with the distinguished Branscombe nose, had the fierce insolence of Satan.

“I’ve had enough of this!” he said. “It’s making people talk, to see a cheap little crook like you talking to me. Get out, and stay out, or by God, I’ll knock you flat!”

Jerry was neither angry nor intimidated.

“After this I won’t bother you so much,” he said. “Only I got to have a thousand dollars to-day.”

“Go to hell!”

“If that’s the way you feel about it,” said Jerry, patiently, “I got to get it from somebody else. I can collect from that dame. She’d sell her house or anything she’s got before she’d see you burn. If you won’t be reasonable—”

“I think—I shall be reasonable,” said Branscombe. “Get the car out of the garage and drive me to some place where we can talk.”

Jerry was very adroit in his handling of the car; he drove fast, his eyes on the road, and Branscombe's sombre eyes were on him. He was studying Jerry.

"I've got to get clear of this whole thing," he thought. "At any cost."

Jerry drove across a bridge and stopped the car in an enchanting spot on a quiet lane, beside a little brook that glittered like silver in the sun and vanished into a cool wood. There were no houses about, there was no traffic. Jerry lit a cigarette and looked at Branscombe, but Branscombe was in no hurry to begin. His idea was not yet wholly clear and definite to him, and such of it as was clear was—disquieting. He stood looking at the brook, and thinking, with a chilly aloofness. He missed the anger that had warmed him, that had made his actions impulsive, almost effortless. He was not angry now; he was regarding Jerry and Blanche as abstract problems.

"There's this," he said, at last. "You want me to be 'reasonable.' I'm prepared to be. I admit that you've got a hold over me. I admit that I've got to pay you for keeping your mouth shut. But I'm not going to keep on paying, as much as you want, whenever you choose to ask."

"Well, but how can you help it?" Jerry asked, with interest.

"I can always get away from you."

"No, you couldn't," said Jerry. "I got my eye on you all the time. I'd find you, all right."

Branscombe smiled.

"No," he said. "There's one way to be rid of you. If my life is to be made such a hell, I can always put a bullet through my head and get out."

“You wouldn’t do that!” said Jerry, indignantly.

“I don’t want to. But for a man like myself, death would be easier than a life like this. You want to bleed me white—”

“Say, listen! A thousand dollars isn’t going to bankrupt you.”

“You won’t stop at that. I’ll never have another day’s peace. And life with this hanging over me isn’t worth living.”

“Listen! You give me this money to-day, and I’ll clear out.”

“You don’t imagine I believe you, do you? No. I’ve been thinking this thing over. I very nearly decided last night to shoot myself.”

“I got to hand it to you,” said Jerry. “You couldn’t of took a better line. Naturally I don’t want you to shoot yourself. I’ll be reasonable, too. We’ll settle on a lump sum, and when I get it, I quit. See?”

“Why should I believe you?”

“Well, what do you want me to do? You talk about being ‘reasonable.’ Well, is it reasonable for me to pass up the chance of getting money in times like this?”

It seemed to Branscombe an amazing thing to hear the fellow talk like this, making no attempt to gloss over his criminal intentions, discussing them as another man might discuss his business. It had not occurred to him before that, to a criminal, crime was matter-of-fact. He was glad it was so; it made it easier for him to say what he wanted.

“I’ll give you the thousand,” he said, “if you’ll do a job for me.”

“Yeah?” said Jerry, thoughtfully. “Jobs like that are hard.”

“What do you mean? Jobs like what?”

“Well,” said Jerry, with a grin. “I don’t guess you’d want me to rob a bank for you. I guess it’s a job like—that other one.”

“What other one?”

“Like that job you done for yourself.”

“I suppose,” said Branscombe, “that it’s inevitable for you to think like that. You’re not only a crook; you’re a fool. You couldn’t understand that a man in my position—”

“Your position don’t look so hot to me,” said Jerry, and that made Branscombe angry again.

“I have a certain standing in the community—” he said. “I’m not a criminal.”

“You’d be surprised to hear what the cops would call what you done,” said Jerry.

Branscombe realised the necessity for controlling his temper.

“I’m not asking you to do anything—illegal for me,” he said. “I simply want you to prevent a—certain person from annoying me.”

“Yeah, and how do I do it?”

“That’s your affair.”

“That’s out. You want to get me where I got you. If I do this little job, then you’ll have something on me. It’s a bright idea, only I don’t like it.”

“It’s that, or nothing,” said Branscombe. “You’ll do what I want, and be paid for it. Or you’ll get nothing. Ever.”

“You wouldn’t kill yourself,” said Jerry. But he was obviously not at all sure about that. Branscombe had found

the one threat that could disturb him.

“How do I do it?” he thought. “Where do my ideas come from? I’ve always led a more or less quiet life. I’ve never before come into contact with types like this. Yet I can manage him. I’ve managed Hilda, and Evans—”

But not Blanche. She, most docile of them all, had done this utterly unexpected thing, had come here, to Patrell’s house. God knew what else she intended to do, what was in her mind.

“Who is it you want kep’ quiet?” asked Jerry.

It was difficult to speak. When once he had spoken, it would be irrevocable.

“There’s a certain person who’s—molesting me,” he said. “If you can induce this person to—leave the country, I’ll pay you the money you want.”

Jerry lit another cigarette.

“I’ll indooce the bird, all right,” he said.

Still Branscombe hesitated. He had to remind himself that if he were not bold and resolute now, he was lost. The girl could ruin him with a word.

“It’s—a woman,” he said.

“A woman?” Jerry repeated. “Well, that’s harder. There’s always more trouble, more in the papers and all, if it’s a woman. You’ll have to pay more if it’s a woman.”

Branscombe was not yet accustomed to the scale of prices in Jerry’s line of business. A thousand dollars seemed to him little enough. But he knew better than to say so.

“I don’t want to know how you manage the thing,” he said. “If you can persuade this woman to let me alone.... Get her to go away....”

He glanced at Jerry; their eyes met. He knew what he was doing. He knew upon what journey he was sending Blanche. But he refused to admit the knowledge to himself. Whatever happened was Jerry's responsibility; not his. He asked only to be free from the menace of the girl's presence.

"And I got to have something in advance," said Jerry.
"Five hundred now."

"I don't carry five hundred dollars in my pocket."

"You can get it. Five hundred now, and a thousand when the job is finished."

"Very well," said Branscombe.

"Now tell me where I'll find this dame," said Jerry.

Branscombe gave him Blanche's name and address.

CHAPTER XVI

Blanche cried on the train going back to the city. She cried because Charlie lived in that nice house, and because she had seen the woman who must be Charlie's wife.

"Real good-looking," she thought. "And such a lot of class...."

She had often enough wondered about Charlie; she knew he had come from some world different from her own, and she had sometimes imagined him in rather dazzling surroundings. But it was none the less a shock to see with her own eyes that tranquil old house in the shady garden, and that blonde woman on the veranda.

"He's *mean!*" she cried to herself. "Two-timing like that...."

But she could find so many excuses for Charlie. Maybe his wife wasn't nice to him. Maybe she was cold and haughty to him.

"I'm glad I didn't see the little girl," she thought. "I'd of felt worse, if I'd seen her. Somehow I never thought of him having children."

She was unhappy as she had never been in her life. She was struggling with an idea not yet clear to her.

"Did I ought to give him up?" she thought, and could not understand why she thought this. It was no great surprise to learn that he was married; she had suspected that before, and had not minded, or thought she was doing any harm.

"I guess it was *seeing* her," she thought. "It makes it kind of more real. Or maybe it was that letter from the little girl...."

I won't be the one to come between him and his family. When I see him, I'll tell him so."

She meant to give him a chance to defend his conduct, though. She couldn't be really angry at Charlie.... She thought and thought about him, about his wife and his child. But she did not give any serious attention to Mr. Brown. He was a friend of Charlie's; it had seemed natural enough to see him there.

"I always felt there was something queer about him," she said to herself, and that was all.

She went to the desk and asked if there was a letter for her. Nothing.

"Well, has he just walked out on me?" she thought.

But it seemed to her cruel and wicked to think things like that about Charlie, when he had arranged all this to make her happy and comfortable.

"I'm not going to judge him till I know," she thought. "That Mr. Brown said he was in trouble. Well, people like Charlie can get in trouble as well as anyone else. Look at bankers, and all. If he'd of been going to walk out on me, he'd of just gone. He wouldn't of spent all this money to send me here."

When she was eating her lunch, she remembered that Charlie was paying for it, and a faithful tenderness filled her.

"I'm going to just wait till he explains," she decided.

It was very tedious, though. She wondered how the other women in the hotel filled their long, long days, what there could be to do. She sat in the lounge again and saw other people sitting there, apparently contented.

"Maybe you get used to it," she thought.

She saw a young man come in and approach the desk; she watched him, as she watched everyone, in her boredom. He spoke to the clerk; the clerk looked at her, and the stranger turned and approached her.

“Miss Brown?” he said. “Your brother sent me.”

It took her a moment to remember that she was supposed to be Mr. Brown’s sister.

“Oh ...!” she said, non-committally.

“Your brother thought maybe you’d like to go out somewheres.”

“With you?”

Her tone was uncompromising. No matter where she had met this fellow, she would have known better than to go out with him.

“Sure!” he said. “Why not? Mr. Brown knows about me. Moore, my name is, Jerry Moore. Ask him about me and see what he says.”

“Mr. Brown is nothing in my life,” said Blanche.

Jerry sat down on a chair beside her and looked at her covertly. If she knew him by intuition, he was also able to form a fairly accurate idea of her. One of those girls who give you a lot of trouble, he thought. He always avoided Blanche’s type, but in this instance he couldn’t; this time he had to discard his take-it-or-leave-it attitude. He resented the trouble he would have to take. He did not like Blanche. She was pretty, but her style of dressing was far too subdued; her manner was chilly and discouraging.

“Maybe she’s mad at Branscombe for sending another fellow here,” he thought. “You never can tell. Maybe it’s not his money she’s after. Maybe she likes him.”

It was difficult to believe that any young and good-looking girl could care much for Branscombe, but things like that did happen.

“It’s this way,” he said. “I’m here in New York, and I got some money to spend, and I want a—nice young lady who will go out with me. I got a girl-friend in Chicago. Mr. Brown knows all about that. He knows I wouldn’t—” He hesitated, not knowing the words to use for this girl who, he felt, would be so easily shocked and affronted. “He knows I wouldn’t have any—serious ideas about you. If he hadn’t of known that, he wouldn’t have sent me here. He thinks such a lot of you.... Only, he knew I had this girl-friend, and he knew it was O.K. He thought we could maybe go to a movie ___”

“It’s not O.K. with me,” said Blanche. “I don’t care what Mr. Brown says. I’ve got a friend, and I don’t care to go out with anybody else.”

Stupid she might be, and irritating, but she said those words with a certain dignity that impressed Jerry. He was surprised, too. She implied that her “friend” was not Branscombe. Then was there another man involved?

“You never know where you’re at, with that bird,” he thought. “He didn’t tell me the half of it. Just said she was staying here and calling herself his sister.... I don’t see how I’ll work this.”

He was silent for a time, thinking. “Induce her to leave the country,” Branscombe had said. But he could have managed that for himself, without calling Jerry in; he could have bribed the girl, or threatened her.

“That wasn’t the idea,” thought Jerry.

He had understood very well what Branscombe expected of him, and he had agreed, because he wanted the money and because he had to be careful with Branscombe. Very careful. He couldn't have Branscombe shooting himself.

"No," he had thought. "I got to make him feel confidence in me. If he thinks I'm liable to crack down on him any minute, he'll just die on me. The way he is now, if I'd of said I wouldn't do this, he wouldn't have given me a cent."

The money was not very much for a job of this sort, but Jerry had intended to take little risk. Branscombe was to be convinced that the girl had gone—permanently, but Jerry had not meant to do anything so dangerous. He had meant to introduce her to a friend of his who would "induce" her to join his theatrical touring company in Algiers. She wouldn't have been at all likely to come back from there. They never did.

"But that's out," he thought. "*She'd* never fall for Fred. I bet she don't even drink. She's dumb, all right, but it's a different kind of dumbness. I don't understand this thing.... She wouldn't ever have had the sense to shake down Branscombe. And she's not in love with him, or anything. Why would he be afraid of *her*?"

The whole thing was going to be far more difficult than he had expected.

"If I got to really bump her off," he thought, "he'll pay. He'll pay, by God! I don't like a job like this.... And lookit what he has the nerve to offer me!"

Still, it wouldn't do to go back to Branscombe and say that he had failed. Branscombe must, at all costs, believe him to be dangerous and competent.

“Of course, I *can* do it,” he thought. “If I can get her out of here.”

She can be found run over, on a lonely road. There would be no reason for thinking her death anything but an accident, and no way of connecting Jerry with it. If the desk clerk were able to give the police a recognizable description of him, Jerry would admit that he had come to the hotel to see the girl, and that they had walked to the corner together. No one could prove that they hadn’t separated then. And for the later hours, he could provide himself with a watertight alibi. He had friends.

“But just the same, it’s a risk,” he thought.

He couldn’t make up his mind. Sitting beside her, he thought of the problem from every point of view.

“I don’t know ...” he thought. “It don’t look so good....”

He sighed to himself, and glanced sidelong at Blanche’s profile.

“I’m disappointed,” he said. “I’m lonesome, and I thought from what Mr. Brown said that you and me could go to a show or something.”

“You can find somebody else, easy enough.”

“It’s you I want,” he answered, with perfect sincerity.

“Why?” she asked, looking coldly at him.

“Well,” he answered, “because you’d understand that I didn’t have—serious ideas. We’d be just like a couple of friends. No monkey business. Because you got your friend, and I got that girl in Chicago. I want to see this picture—‘The Passionate Princess,’ and I don’t want to go alone.”

Blanche wanted to see that picture, too, very much. But it was too expensive. She frowned a little, thinking of the long,

empty afternoon before her; she recalled Mr. Moore's words, and wondered.

"Is it true?" she thought. "Does he really want to go out just like friends? Or is it something Mr. Brown's got up, to make trouble between Charlie and me?"

She glanced at Jerry, and found him looking at her. He read the hesitation in her face, and knew he had found the right line. His personal charm would be of no avail here.

"I got to act like a gentleman," he thought. "Got to win her confidence." And aloud: "I don't want to bother you, or anything," he said. "If you don't want to come and see that picture, it's all right with me. But you wouldn't have any objections, would you, if I was to just sit here and talk to you a while?" And he added, a little anxiously: "Pardon my smoking."

She liked his saying that.

"I smoke, myself," she said, more amiably. "Only I didn't here, because the other ladies didn't seem to."

"Well, listen!" said Jerry. "I got my car here. We could take a ride round the Park, and you could have a couple of smokes before we went to the show."

She thought that over, and she could see no possible harm in it. It was broad daylight; there would be plenty of people about; if she had cause to be displeased with Mr. Moore she could get away from him at any moment. It would be nice to take a drive in the Park, to go to a show.

"Well.... All right ..." she said. "I don't care if I do."

The magnificence of his roadster impressed her, as he had expected when he borrowed it from a friend who owned a garage. He drove very well, and he was courteous and

always impersonal. They went to the show, and he did not try to hold her hand.

“He hasn’t got Charlie’s class,” she thought. “You can see he hasn’t got Charlie’s education. But he seems to be all right.”

She wasn’t quite sure, though. No matter how well he behaved, she saw in Mr. Moore something that made her uneasy.

“Phony,” she thought.

Still, it was better to be with him than alone in the hotel, and when he asked her to dine with him, she accepted in a tepid fashion, designed not to give him too much encouragement.

“I got to go to the hotel first,” she said, “to see if there’s a message for me.”

“You can ’phone.”

That didn’t suit her. Suppose Charlie had come, she thought, suppose he was there, waiting for her?

“If it could *only* be like that!” she thought. “It seems so terrible long....”

But he was not there, and there was no message from him. She stood at the desk, staring blankly at the clerk. And suddenly she remembered that house in Westchester, that fair-haired woman she had seen on the veranda.

“Suppose I don’t ever see him again?” she thought.

Her heart grew cold with desolation; she forgot the clerk, forgot Mr. Moore; her eyes filled with tears, and she turned away blindly.

“What’s the matter?” asked Jerry.

“Nothing.”

“Will we go out to dinner now?”

“I don’t want to,” she said. “I feel—sort of mis’rable.”

He saw that he would have to begin all over again, and it wasn’t worth it.

“Will you wait here for a minute?” he said. “I got to make a ’phone call.”

He made up his mind that if Branscombe were not at home, he would postpone any further action. And that if Branscombe were not prepared to do considerably better by him, he would drop the thing altogether. He shut himself into a booth and called the number, and Branscombe was there.

“It’s Jerry,” he said, speaking out of the corner of his mouth. “This job you want me to do.... Well, it’s a dam’ sight harder than I thought. I can’t do it for that money. I don’t know if I can do it at all.”

There was a moment’s silence.

“Then you’ll get nothing,” said Branscombe.

“You’d be surprised!” said Jerry. “Don’t you worry! You’ll be seeing me soon.”

“I told you how I intended to avoid—any unpleasantness,” said Branscombe. “I definitely prefer that course to being continually molested.”

His voice had a curt and contemptuous tone that filled Jerry with a sort of despair. He had never before met anyone like Branscombe and he could not understand him. For all he knew, his victim was quite capable of carrying out his threat, and killing himself.

“Listen!” he said. “I don’t think you got cause to worry about that part, anyway.”

“You don’t know a dam’ thing about it,” said Branscombe. “Are you going to do the job, or aren’t you? I want a definite answer.”

“Listen! I got things lined up, only there’s a lot more work than I thought. It ought to be worth three grand to you.”

“No.”

“I’ll finish it for that. For three grand. Three thousand. That won’t bankrupt you.”

“In a few days you’ll be asking for more.”

“No. Pay me that and I go to Chicago right away. That’s Gawd’s truth!”

“You’ll come back.”

Jerry did not know how to make himself believed; he was altogether at a loss.

“Well, you got to have some confidence in me!” he cried.

Branscombe laughed.

“All right!” he said. “I’ll agree to your terms. Telephone me to-morrow and I’ll arrange about paying you. Don’t come here again.”

“You swear you’ll pay me the three thousand?”

“Less the advance I’ve already made you,” said Branscombe, and hung up the receiver.

Jerry returned to Blanche, and he had less trouble than he had expected. She was so unhappy, so entirely alone, that this stranger seemed almost like a friend. He had been patient and polite, and she had no one else. He took her to a good restaurant; he ordered lavishly. But not the way Charlie did; Charlie was always sure of himself, and Mr. Moore had a

subdued sort of uneasiness about him. She couldn't stop thinking of Charlie....

“Want some champagne?” asked Mr. Moore.

“No, thanks.”

“Want to take a little ride?”

“I don't care if I do,” she answered.

He had not hoped for so ready an acceptance; he had thought it was going to be a long and difficult task to get her to come. But her vague fear of this man had left her now. She was used to him, able to take him for granted. And the thought of an evening alone in her hotel room was intolerable.

“It's a hot night,” he said. “We could go out in the country a ways.”

“All right!” she assented, listlessly.

He drove through the city as quickly as he could, and across the Queensborough Bridge he turned into dark, quiet roads.

“Now I got her where I want her,” he thought. “But—now what? God! Now what ...?”

CHAPTER XVII

For the first time in his twenty-three years Jerry was engaged in a moral struggle. He had, before this, been afraid, he had been doubtful, but he had never felt anything like this.

He had no liking for Blanche, nor did he feel any pity for her. He didn't care what happened to her. He knew that Branscombe would pay him if he got rid of her, and he wanted that money badly. He had no scruples about killing; he was not worried about the risk. Yet he could not do it.

“Getting soft?” he asked himself, in wonder and dismay.

If it had been a matter of robbing her, he would have killed her without a moment's hesitation. If he had been angry at her, if she had been in any way dangerous to him, it would have been easy. But he knew she had no money on her, and he could not work up any rage against her.

This was a good place, a very lonely road. She was entirely unsuspecting; all he had to do was to hold his big silk handkerchief tightly over her nose and mouth until she was quiet. Then he would put her out in the road and run the car over her.

He couldn't.

“Just doesn't seem any point to it,” he thought. “Hell ...!”

It occurred to him that if he were to try making love to her, and she repulsed him, he might get into a wholesome rage. But he couldn't do that, either; he was too indifferent toward her. He tried thinking of the money Branscombe would give him, but that seemed somehow remote and intangible. Jerry had peculiar ideas about money. When he could get his hands on any, he spent it at once, with swaggering lavishness, not

so much because he was a fool as because he saw no use in providing for a very unlikely future. He lived like a roving man-at-arms in the Middle Ages; he would sell his services to anyone. He was not brave; he was reckless, for he had nothing to lose. When he had money he enjoyed himself; when he had none he was a mangy and starving wolf.

“We might as well be turning back,” said Blanche, with a yawn.

That yawn, those commonplace words, made it worse. There was no excitement about this, no drama.

“Oh, hell!” he cried to himself. “You can’t just turn around and kill someone that’s sitting beside you.”

But he wasn’t going to lose all that money. He had had trouble enough to get her here, and he wouldn’t be such a fool as to let her go.

“This is one time I got to have a few drinks,” he decided. “I’ll take her to Ben’s. And that’d be a good thing in other ways, too.”

He thought over this. As a rule, he was absolutely sober; it was dangerous not to be. But there were times when a shot of whisky helped a lot.

“I got to stop and leave a message for a friend,” he said.

“Is it far? Because I want to get back.”

“Coupla miles. It won’t take a moment. Have a smoke?”

He felt a sort of friendliness toward her now. He stopped the car and held a match for her cigarette. When he had had some drinks, it would be all right.

“It’s a nice night,” he observed.

“Yes, I like the summer,” said Blanche.

“The summer’s all right in the country,” said Jerry. “Hot in the city, though.”

They were not very good at small talk; moreover, Jerry had never before tried to talk in this impersonal way to a girl. But she didn’t mind long silences. She smoked in a sort of tranquility, solaced by the mild and quiet night.

He turned the car into a circular driveway before a roadhouse; Ben’s Shore Dinners. The veranda was strung with coloured lights, an orchestra was playing inside; there was a forlorn sort of gaiety about the lights, the music, in this isolated place thickly set with trees. He drove the car up on the grass under the trees, at some distance from the roadhouse.

“If you’ll just wait here ...” he said. “I won’t be a minute.”

“Have you got a cigarette?”

“No. I’ll bring you back some.”

He had plenty in his pocket, but he did not want her to smoke just now. He didn’t want anyone to notice the car at all. He went into Ben’s alone; everyone would see him there, alone. He entered the main dining-room; the more people who saw him the better. Ben caught sight of him, and came across to his table.

“What are *you* doing here?” he asked.

“I just won a big pot off Louis and the boys. I feel good,” said Jerry. “I’ll buy me a couple of your bum whiskys.”

“There’s a game on, out back.”

“Not for me!” said Jerry.

“Rosita’s here.”

“She can stay here,” said Jerry. “I don’t wanna see her.”

He swallowed the whisky and ordered another. He was feeling better now.

“How much?” he asked Ben.

“You don’t owe me nothing,” said Ben. “It’s on the house. Take another, Jerry.”

Jerry accepted, and then rose.

“You’re in a hurry,” said Ben.

“I wanna get some sleep,” said Jerry.

He felt all right now. He felt happy and swaggering. Tomorrow he was going to have money in his pockets, and maybe he would have a party at Ben’s. Rosita wasn’t so bad.

“Crazy about me, all right,” he thought. “They all fall for me—except that one. Who does she think she is, anyways? I’m not good enough for her.... Is *that* so?”

He was working himself into a rage against Blanche now. When he reached the car he got in without speaking to her. “Did you bring me some cigarettes?” she asked.

“No.”

“Well, can’t we stop somewheres and get some?”

“I’ll see if I can find one in my pocket,” he said.

It was a good excuse for stopping. He drove to the spot he had in mind, a corner where two unfrequented roads met. He stopped the car and took off his coat; he pretended to look in the pockets. She sat beside him, waiting.

He flung his coat over her head. She gave a stifled scream and flung up her hands. She tore at the thing that blinded and smothered her. She clawed at Jerry’s hands. She couldn’t breathe.... He pressed the coat more tightly over her nose and mouth.... She gave an agonised gasp, and tried to pull away

his hands.... She—couldn't breathe.... This must—be death.... All black—And no—air....

She became suddenly limp and quiet. He didn't want her to die. Death by suffocation produced very definite symptoms. She was to be found run over, and with no marks upon her of any previous violence. The police were smart about things like that, if anything aroused their suspicions. All he wanted was for her to be unconscious, or semi-conscious for a few moments. The moment he thought it safe he removed the coat.

He descended, and lifted her out. He laid her in the road—on the wrong side, so that an accident would look more natural. Her hat had fallen off, and he pulled it down on her head; he fetched her pocket book and laid it beside her. He drove along the road a little way, because he wanted to get up some speed. He had to calculate this thing carefully. You could run over a person in a way that didn't kill. And if she wasn't quite dead, she could talk.

He turned the car to go back and finish the job. And to his dismay and anger he saw that she had got up and was trying to run, staggering down the road.

“All right!” he said aloud, and drove the car after her.

She looked back over her shoulder and stumbled aside, just in time. He stopped the car and got out. He certainly had to finish this now, for his own sake. She screamed, but it was a feeble enough sound. She was among the trees by the road side. It was dark, but he could hear her panting. He would have to knock her unconscious now, and that would leave a mark. But he thought he could manage the rest of it so that an extra bruise wouldn't be noticed.

She was trying to run. She stumbled, and he was upon her.

“Charlie! *Charlie!*” she cried. “Charlie! Help me!”

Jerry stopped short. She struggled to her feet again, and grasped her arm.

“Who did you say?” he demanded.

“O God ...!”

“Answer me, or I’ll kill you, you—! Who’s this Charlie?”

She was collapsing; he held her upright; he shook her.

“Charlie *who?*” he said.

“Charlie—Patrell ...” she said. “I—Good-bye....”

He let her go, and she fell in a heap. He bent over her, felt her wrist, listened to her heart.

“Jeese ...!” he said.

He lit a cigarette and went back to his car; he drove off. The glow of the whisky was all gone now; he felt cold as ice.

CHAPTER XVIII

Hilda Patrell waked very early, and lay looking out at the sky that was grey after a night of gentle rain. Her heart was heavy. She felt fatigued and listless.

“Am I doing right?” she asked herself.

All her life she had been asking herself that; even as a little girl, in this very house, she used to worry over her short-comings, used to examine her conscience; all her life she had suffered from the conflict between her ardent and impulsive heart and her stern sense of duty.

“I mustn’t be over-righteous,” she thought. “I mustn’t deceive myself.”

It was a sad thing that she and Charlie should be so irrevocably separated, the love between them so completely gone. She could not even be angry at this latest infidelity of his. She was only sorry that he should call another woman his wife, sorry that he had written that letter about Coralie, that he had proved himself so base. But her regret was almost impersonal; it was so long since she had seen him.

“If he wants a divorce, I’m willing now,” she thought. “Perhaps he’ll marry this poor woman. And then ...? Shall I marry Andrew?”

Until he had declared himself, she had never thought of Branscombe as a lover.

“I suppose that was stupid of me. He came so often. But he was so—formal. It’s hard to imagine him in love....”

She knew well enough that she was not at all in love with him, and never would be. But it was that very fact which made her consider marrying him. She had that fault of the

over-conscientious; she was afraid of anything that she liked too well. Her reasons for considering Branscombe were impeccable. She respected him; he was firm and strong, she thought, a man she could trust.

“I think he’s a little like Vincent,” she thought.

There was no one in the world she trusted as she did Vincent Colton.

“I never can talk to him, though,” she thought. “He’s so obstinate and so irritating.... And I don’t believe he likes me.... He’s very sweet to Coralie—but Andrew is nice to her, too, in his rather stiff way. It would be the best possible thing for Coralie.”

Coralie was beyond measure the most important thing in her life. If she could not honestly believe that it would benefit Coralie for her to marry Branscombe, she would let him go without a qualm.

“He could do so much for her,” she thought. “I’m sure he’d be very generous.”

More than once she had wanted to speak to Coralie about him, to find out, diplomatically, how the child felt. But she could not; her innate reserve checked her.

“Perhaps to-day—” she thought.

It would be a comfort to have Andrew at her side. She had been alone so long; she had been distrustful so long; it would be a balm to have a man she could trust utterly.

“Eva is a charming girl,” she thought. “We’d get on well.”

She sighed. There was a prospect of security and peace before her, but so much that was sorrowful and bitter for her to go through first. A divorce.... She hoped it could be arranged so that Coralie need know nothing about it. Not

until she was old enough to understand a little.... She hoped that Charles would not behave badly about it, and make matters worse....

The door-bell rang, strangely loud in the sleeping house. She glanced at her watch; it was not yet six o'clock. Who could come at this hour? She got up and, putting on her dressing-gown and slippers, ran down the stairs. The lower hall was dark this rainy morning; she turned on the light before she opened the door.

A girl stood out there, and never in her life had Hilda seen so pitiable an object. Her face was white as paper and discoloured by a purple bruise on the cheekbone; she was soaked with rain, her hair clinging to her forehead under her sodden hat. And in her eyes there was some intolerable appeal.

“What’s the matter?” cried Hilda.

“You’re—Charlie’s wife, aren’t you?”

“Yes ...” Hilda answered, with an effort. “Come in! You look ill.”

But the girl did not stir.

“I didn’t ought to of come to you ...” she said.

“Come in!” Hilda repeated gently, and when the girl still did not stir, she took her cold hand and drew her inside. “You look so ill.... Will you tell me your name?”

“Blanche,” said the other. She was looking about her at the drawing-room, that had an air of chilly stiffness in the grey light. A grand piano, shelves of books, flowers in vases....

“O God!” she cried, clasping her hands. “I didn’t mean to ever do any harm to anyone.... But I must of done something awful—for this to happen to me!”

“Please sit down—”

“I can’t. I’m sopping wet.”

“It doesn’t matter. Let me get you some brandy—hot coffee....”

Blanche sank into a chair.

“I didn’t ought to of come here.... Only, where could I go? I don’t know ... I don’t know.... Why would anyone want to *kill me?*”

“To kill you?”

“He came to the hotel. Moore, he said his name was.... He said Mr. Brown sent him.... He asked me to take a ride with him. I didn’t like him very much, but I thought he was all right.... And all the time, when he was so polite, he must of had it in his mind—to kill me.... I can’t—I can’t understand it... We didn’t have any fight or anything—”

“Can’t I do something for you? You’re shivering.”

“I’ll *never* get over it! Not all my life! I went with him, to a kind of a hotel ... I waited outside.... There was music in there, and it sounded sort of sad and sweet.... He seemed all right.... If he was a lunatic, or anything, I could get over it. But he’s not crazy! It gives you—such an awful feeling, to think there’s anyone hates you that much.”

Hilda listened, in a fog of confusion; she could make no sense of the story. But she could see how utterly unnerved and ill the girl was.

“I’m so sorry ...” she said.

“First he tried to smother me.... Oh, that was—it was the way you must feel when you’re dying.... When I sort of got my breath I was lying in the road, and he was in the car. He was driving—right at me.... You can’t believe there’s anyone

really wants to kill you.... I tried to run away.... I got in some woods, but I fell down, and he caught me.... I guess he must of thought I was dead when he left me.”

Tears were running down her face, slow tears, forlorn and bitter. Hilda was unbearably moved by this incomprehensible grief.

“Please come upstairs,” she said. “You must get your wet clothes off. And a cup of hot coffee—”

“No, I can’t! I can’t! I—did you a wrong!”

“I’m afraid I don’t quite understand ...” said Hilda, with great effort. “Do you mean—Charles?”

“Yes.”

“Are you—were you at that boarding-house?”

“Yes.”

“You wrote me a note, didn’t you?”

“No, I didn’t! Never! I never would have made any trouble. Only this—this terrible thing happened to me—and Charlie was gone.... I didn’t have *anybody*.”

“Do you mean that—he left you?”

“I don’t know. Only, Charlie wasn’t ever mean to me, or anything. It worries me so, I’m nearly crazy. I had to come and ask you if he’s all right. Because I can’t help feeling it’s all part of a plot.... I mean, it’s all—been so queer—with Mr. Brown and Mr. Moore and all.... I wouldn’t try to see him, or anything, if I can just know he’s all right.”

“I can’t tell you ... I’m so sorry ... I haven’t seen him or heard from him for some time.”

“*You* don’t know?” She gave a sound that was half sob, half gasp. “You see, this friend of Charlie’s—Mr. Brown,

you know—he said Charlie was in trouble. And I—” She began to weep, in a desperate, uncontrollable way. “Oh, I’m so worried!”

Most of what she said was unintelligible to Hilda. She had a confused idea that a murderous attack had been made upon the poor girl, by Heaven knew whom, and she had a very clear idea of the relation that had existed between her husband and Blanche. But taken as a whole, the thing did not make sense, and it alarmed her. She saw that the girl was on the verge of a collapse....

“Please come upstairs!” she entreated.

Blanche raised her miserable glance to Hilda’s face.

“I wronged you!” she said.

Hilda was embarrassed and a little shocked; it seemed to her a dreadful thing that one human creature should show this humility toward another.

“I’m afraid you’ll be ill—” she began.

“I pretended I was married to Charlie! I didn’t know about you—but I did sort of guess.... I hadn’t any right to come here—But I’m so worried—I’m just sick with worry about Charlie.”

“You’d better worry about yourself a little. Please don’t stay here like this, in your wet clothes.”

“Well, don’t you care? Aren’t you—mad at me?”

“I’m only—so very sorry.... You’ve been through a horrible experience.”

She tried to speak to Blanche as she would have spoken to any woman of her acquaintance, but it was not successful.

“Can’t you do something about Charlie? The police would pay attention to *you*—”

“You haven’t been to the police?”

“No, I don’t want to. I don’t want anyone to know about Charlie and me.... I must of lain in those woods a long time.... I finally got out to the road and some people came along in a car. They were real nice to me. I didn’t tell them the truth. I just told them I’d been out with a man and he got impudent and I had a fight with him. I got them to drive me to the station, and I took a train to New York. I rang up the hotel to see if maybe there was a message from Charlie, but there wasn’t. I was scared to go back to the hotel. I thought maybe Mr. Moore’d be there. And I didn’t see how I could *ever* find Charlie again.... I went to the Grand Central and took a train out here.... I thought if I told you, you’d do something.”

“I will!” Hilda assured her. “If you’ll come upstairs and rest, I’ll see what can be done.”

Blanche rose docilely, and Hilda put her arm about her and helped her to the stairs.

“I didn’t ought to bother you—only that Mr. Brown said Charlie was in trouble—”

“What sort of trouble?”

“He didn’t say. I thought it was about a bank, or something.”

“That doesn’t seem—very likely.”

“Well, you know, Charlie’s got a wild streak in him.”

How strange, how unbelievable, thought Hilda, that they should be talking to each other like this. How strange, and somehow how right, that this forlorn girl should have come to her.... It was as if she were in some measure responsible for her husband’s misdeeds, and always would be.

“You’re so weak,” she said. “Do you think you can manage?”

“I’ll try.”

“Just a few more steps....”

“I’ll try.”

“That’s the way! Now—!”

Blanche slid away from her supporting arm and collapsed on the floor of the landing.

CHAPTER XIX

On the floor above was Frank, the Portuguese gardener, and Rosa his wife, who was cook and house-maid; they had been with Hilda for years, and she was sure of their fidelity and affection. Yet she did not turn to them for help now; she went to Coralie.

“Coralie ...” she said. “Something’s happened. Can you help me?”

Coralie got up at once; her eyes were heavy with sleep, but she stood straight as an arrow in her severe white pyjamas; she was not startled; it took her only a moment to get awake. She was a child, but she was Hilda’s own child; she had that quietness that Hilda valued above all things.

“A poor girl came here to see me about something. She’s been in an accident. She’s fainted, in the hall. I want to get her into the guest-room. Do you think we can manage it alone, Coralie?”

“Let’s see,” said Coralie.

She knelt beside Blanche. And to Hilda there was something pitiable in the contrast between Coralie’s cool freshness and the utter weariness and exhaustion of the other. Blanche was young, too, yet she looked—finished.

“I’ll get the room ready,” she said.

She went into that room, that was orderly and fragrant, like every corner of her beloved house; she threw back the cover of the bed and spread a blanket over the lower sheet.

“You take her feet,” said Coralie, and put her hands under Blanche’s arms.

They had no difficulty in getting Blanche on to the bed; they had both the same easy and controlled strength.

“We must get her wet clothes off,” said Hilda. “And then, if she hasn’t come to, we’d better send for the doctor.”

They were deft about the task; they got off the sodden shoes, the coat and skirt and blouse.

“Sort of cheap black underclothes with lots of lace ...” said Coralie, and looked at her mother, as if asking what she should think of this girl. But in Hilda’s grave eyes she could read nothing but concern for the other.

They made Blanche comfortable, in a clean nightdress, a hot-water bottle at her icy feet; Coralie was rubbing her damp hair with a towel when she opened her eyes.

“Are you feeling better?” asked Hilda.

“Yes ...” Blanche answered, faintly.

“I’ll bring you some hot coffee. Coralie will stay with you.” Blanche sipped the coffee with a sort of weak eagerness; slow tears ran down her face.

“You’re terrible good to me,” she said. “You’re—Would you mind if I had a cig’rette?”

“I’d be glad. Only I’m afraid there aren’t any in the house.”

“I got some in my bag.”

Coralie got them for her out of the drenched velvet bag, and Blanche lay back on the pillows, exhausted, but quiet enough now. Hilda glanced at Coralie, who followed her out of the room.

“Coralie—I’ve telephoned to Mr. Branscombe.”

“Why *him*?”

“But why not?” asked Hilda, surprised. “It seems to me that he’s the best person—”

“Why don’t you get Doctor Carew, Mother?”

“I wanted Mr. Branscombe’s advice first. Perhaps she doesn’t need a doctor. Only rest and care.”

“He wouldn’t know.”

Hilda was somewhat at a loss.

“Perhaps she’d—rather not have a doctor, if it’s not absolutely necessary.”

“Is she a crook, or something, Mother?”

It was natural that the child should be curious. But, for all her blunt candour, she had her mother’s sense of decorum, and her mother’s capacity for decent reticence.

“I don’t think so,” said Hilda. “But it doesn’t matter.”

Coralie was silent for a moment.

“Wouldn’t Uncle Vincent do?” she asked.

“I think Mr. Branscombe has more knowledge of the world.”

“I don’t,” said Coralie. “And I—well, I wouldn’t trust him about anything.”

“But, Coralie!” cried Hilda, immeasurably startled. “I thought you liked him.”

“No,” said Coralie. “He’s—” Her delicate brows knitted in an effort to find words for an idea not quite clear to her. “The way he drives,” she said.

“I’m sure he’s not reckless.”

“Reckless!” Coralie repeated with scorn. “Gosh! Anything but! He’s just thinking about himself and his own safety all the time. And he gets angry with people that get in his way. I

don't think he'd care what happened, if it didn't hurt him. I bet you he wouldn't care if he ran over somebody, as long as it didn't get *him* in any trouble."

"I don't think it's fair to say things like that, Coralie. You can't possibly know—"

"Well, that's just the way I feel," said Coralie.

"You don't like him?"

"No. I don't like him a bit."

"I didn't know that," said Hilda.

She had grown a little pale. She knew that Coralie was looking at her, but she did not meet the child's glance.

"Don't you think that perhaps it's just—prejudice, Coralie?" she asked.

"I don't know. I *never* liked him. That first day we saw him at the beach I didn't like him. He was so sort of snobbish to the other people. And I *hated* his bathing-suit."

Now their eyes met, and in Hilda's was a sort of wonder. Coralie was a child, but Hilda had complete confidence in her integrity and loyalty. And now, for the first time, she realized that this child would soon be a woman, that even now she had something of a woman's way of thinking. She herself had not liked Branscombe's very conservative bathing-suit; it had seemed to her a little priggish for a man as young as he....

"Anyhow. I have telephoned to him," she said. "Will you stay with—Blanche, Coralie, while I dress?"

It had been instinctive to telephone to Branscombe, because of her trust in him. For Charles's sake she had not wished to send for a doctor unless it were imperative. The girl had said Charles was "in trouble," had talked

incomprehensibly about a “plot.” If Charles were in some serious difficulty, involved in something disgraceful, he must be shielded as well as possible, for Coralie’s sake. That was obvious. But, after all, wouldn’t Vincent have been the right one to summon? He was Charles’s friend.

“Am I losing my judgment?” she thought. “Am I behaving like a fool?”

Her cheeks grew hot.

“I’m not a girl,” she thought. “I’m a middle-aged woman. I—but have I been stupid about Andrew?”

It was hard to think that. His devotion had been so great a comfort to her, had somehow made her feel young again. She had taken it for granted that Coralie liked him.

“I know she’s very intelligent, but she’s only a child. I mustn’t pay too much attention to what she says.... Perhaps he is a little snobbish.... But for her to say that she wouldn’t trust him.... He’s so honourable and straightforward....”

It occurred to her then that perhaps Coralie was jealous.

“She needn’t be,” thought Hilda. “No matter how much I like Andrew, he simply wouldn’t count, compared to her. No one would. If it would make her unhappy for me to marry him, I’d never see him again. That’s what used to make Charles so angry—my putting Coralie first. He said it wasn’t natural. I never could see that.... And anyhow, whether it’s ‘natural’ or not, that’s the way I feel.... Of course, she’s very young. Perhaps she’ll change as she gets to know him better.”

She thought again of Andrew’s very conservative bathing-suit. She wanted not to think of it; it seemed unspeakably petty to let *that* matter.

“But it does!” she thought. “I really didn’t like him, that first day.”

She bathed and dressed, and went downstairs to wait for him on the veranda. It was a sweet summer morning; she sighed, because the world could not be happier.... The milk-wagon was going along the shady street, the trees stirred in the breeze, the sky was a pure blue. It was a scene familiar and dear to her; she could remember the long summer days of her childhood here; she could almost forget that Charles had ever been a part of her life, that she had been hurt and unhappy.

Branscombe’s car was coming round the corner.

“He does drive rather slowly,” she thought.

Surely that was nothing against him. Only, for a young man, he was remarkably cautious.... He got out and waved to her; his face looked anxious. But he stopped to lock the car.

“Why not?” she demanded of herself. “I’m being unreasonable to-day.”

He came along the path toward her, and she looked at him with an absent smile. He was handsome, he was distinguished.... She had found him invariably sympathetic, chivalrous, admirable. And yet.... What was it about him that made his face seem like a mask? Why, in the morning sun, should he seem so unfamiliar, so strange?

“I must not let myself be affected by what Coralie said,” she told herself.

Yet, looking at that tall, distinguished figure in grey, it seemed to her as if he walked in some chilly shadow, utterly alone.

CHAPTER XX

The telephone rang, and Branscombe waked with a violent start. For a moment he lay in a sweat of fear. He saw by his watch that it was not yet six. Who could ring him up at such an hour ...? Jerry ...? He would not listen to anything Jerry had to tell him....

The bell went on and on. It would wake Eva.... Suppose she spoke to Jerry ...? He lifted the receiver and said "Hello!" in a curt, unsteady voice.

"Andrew ...? I'm sorry if I've waked you. But something has happened ...," said Hilda's voice.

These were words he could not ignore.

"Something's happened? What?"

"I'd rather not tell you over the telephone.... I know it's very early, but if you could come over, Andrew....?"

"At once," he said, and hung up the receiver.

He began to dress in haste, and with a nervousness that made him clumsy.

"No," he told himself. "This won't do. After all, it's probably only something about her damned child. She didn't sound much upset. It can't be anything serious. It's only the child, or Colton's done something...."

Had Colton found out about Patrell's disappearance, and told Hilda? If he had, very well. Branscombe had his explanation ready. No need to be so apprehensive. Above all, no need to feel this sickening dread of Colton. Colton was a fool, and he himself was clever. He went downstairs with the utmost caution; it would be unbearable if Eva should call out and ask him where he was going.... He was clever; he had

managed to survive so many dangers. He could handle Jerry, and Evans, and Eva.... And Blanche ...? No! That was Jerry's affair entirely....

"She's probably on board some ship now," he told himself. "I hope to God she is...."

If only he would never have to know.... But he would have to know; before he paid off Jerry, he would have to have some very definite proof that he would not be troubled again by Blanche.

"Those hussies always come to a bad end," he said. "And what does it *matter* ...? If Jerry makes love to her, offers her money, she'll be off with him, and forget Patrell. She's utterly worthless...."

The freshness of the early morning almost startled him. It was a long time since he had been out so early; he had forgotten how beautiful and vivid the world was. He had got so wretchedly little out of life, had asked so little. He was young and vigorous; he had money; he could have everything. And he would. It was incredible to think that all he had wanted was to marry Hilda Patrell and settle down to domestic monotony. He admired Hilda; in a way he was fond of her, but he could do better. Some exquisite and voluptuous woman, with dark, oval eyes and a ripe, subtle mouth ... a Renaissance woman, loving him fiercely.... A woman capable of poisoning an enemy.... A woman who could understand the complexities of his soul....

An immense exultation filled him.... He could and he would escape from the bread-and-butter life. He would live magnificently. If he had purchased his freedom by crime, he would feel no remorse. Patrell's death had been, in a way, an accident; it had not been premeditated. But for whatever

happened to Blanche he would be responsible. In his heart he did not believe she would leave the country. He believed that she was dead, and he was glad.

As he got out of the car Hilda opened the door of the house. She looked handsome, but completely unalluring. A nice woman, a good woman. But no mate for *him*. He put on a manner of grave and friendly concern.

“What is it, my dear?” he asked, holding out his hand.

She took it, but in an absent-minded way. He thought of a white, long-fingered, perfumed hand, adorned with jewels....

“It was kind of you to come,” she said. “I do want your advice....”

“Something has happened?”

“Yes,” she answered. “Very early this morning a girl came here. She was in the most pitiable condition—”

“A girl? A—a girl you know?”

“No. A stranger. She came because she’s so desperately worried about Charles.”

Branscombe looked at her, but he did not see her.

“This is the end,” he said to himself.

The end of all his plans, all his intelligence, the end of his one brief moment of life. Despair was on him, and he was mortally stricken.

“She thinks Charles is in danger of some sort I can’t quite understand—but evidently she’s been through a horrible experience. She says someone tried to kill her.... The poor thing collapsed.... Andrew, you take it so very quietly.... You couldn’t have heard about this before, could you?”

It was as if his cold and paralysed spirit groped and found, Heaven knows where, some vestige of fortitude and energy.

“No,” he answered. “It’s simply that the whole thing seems to me—too fantastic. This girl is probably imposing upon you.”

“She hasn’t asked me for anything at all, Andrew. Except to help her find Charles. She says he’s disappeared. Apparently she’s been living with him—”

“You can’t believe anything a worthless hussy like *that* tells you....”

He saw a sort of grave wisdom in her eyes.

“I’m very sorry for her,” she said. “I think she’s honestly devoted to Charles. And certainly she’s ill and exhausted....”

“You’re so generous ...” he said. “It would be only too easy to impose upon you.”

“She’s not imposing upon me,” said Hilda briefly.

He saw that he had made a mistake, at the moment when any least mistake might destroy him; he saw that to Hilda he had appeared hard, or even brutal, when it was vitally necessary that she should have quite another impression of him.

“I suppose I’m prejudiced,” he said. “But that’s because of *you*. I don’t like to think of your coming into contact with a woman of that sort.”

“Somehow she doesn’t seem like that,” said Hilda. “She’s so pathetic.... I can’t quite understand her story, but it’s plain that something dreadful has happened to her.... Perhaps I should have sent for the doctor at once, only.... On Coralie’s account I’d hate there to be any public scandal.”

“Naturally,” said Branscombe. “Hilda, I think I’d better see the woman.”

“She’s only a girl,” said Hilda, and he saw that again his tone had betrayed his savage hatred.

“I’d better see her,” he went on. “Of course, if it’s necessary, the police will have to be notified. But possibly you’ve misunderstood her.”

“She’s ill. It would be cruel to worry her.”

“I shan’t worry her. I’d simply like to learn the truth. If you’ll let me see her, alone—”

“I don’t think she’d like that. She’s more or less used to me now.”

“Let me see her alone,” he urged. “This may be a very serious matter, Hilda; something that might affect Coralie’s entire future. You can be sure that I’ll use the utmost tact and discretion. But naturally, I’ll be able to handle it better than you. A man’s life brings him into contact with—with people you’d never meet.”

She doubted that. She doubted if he could handle this matter better than she could. Looking at him, he seemed curiously old-fashioned and priggish, and she wished very much that she had sent for Vincent instead. But Andrew was here, and he already knew so much about her personal affairs.

“You’ll be very gentle with her, won’t you?” she said. “Coralie’s sitting with her now.”

“Coralie!” he exclaimed. “Hilda, the child’s quite old enough to realize what this woman is.”

“I think she does realize,” said Hilda. “And I think she feels as I do. That the poor girl is very ill and very unhappy.”

I'll tell her to leave Blanche now."

He said no more. He stood in the hall, looking after Hilda as she mounted the stairs, and again he said to himself:

"This is the end. Blanche will talk. She'll tell about Jerry. And about me. There'll be a search made for Patrell. And the moment Jerry thinks it's to his own advantage, he'll tell the truth."

It was as if he stood within a ring of enemies, a ring that was narrowing. Blanche, Jerry—Evans, Colton, all enemies. And Hilda could become an enemy. The least suspicion of what he had done would turn her implacably against him. There was no one but Eva, no one in the whole world. Eva would never desert him.

Hilda was coming back now, and she did not smile.

"I asked her if she felt able to talk to a friend of mine, and she's more than willing.... She thinks of nothing but saving Charles from—I don't quite know what...." She was silent for a moment, her fair head bent. "Charles must have been very kind to her," she said. "I'm glad of that."

"You're 'glad' that your husband was unfaithful to you? You don't feel the least reluctance toward having a creature like that under your roof? Good God! You don't mind having your young daughter in the company of her father's mistress?"

He knew, from Hilda's face, that he ought to stop, ought to retract those words. But he could not. His fury against Blanche was uncontrollable.

"I'll be considerate toward her," he said. "I'll be diplomatic.... But women like that ought to be branded. They ought to be—"

Hilda turned away.

“It’s the first door on the right,” she said.

His knees were trembling, as he mounted the stairs. He had made a deplorable mistake.... He must not make another. He must keep his wits about him now. His life was at stake.

He realised that, and had to stop for a moment in a sweat of terror. His life depended upon his handling of this situation. He had been strong and resourceful before; he had met each danger as it came, and had triumphed. If he kept his head, perhaps he could triumph even now.... Only, he was growing so tired.... There was never a respite. He began to see what he could do now to save himself, but the idea formed more slowly; it was not one of those flashes of inspiration that had elated him.

The door of the room stood open; the sun was shining in; he stopped, looking at the cheerful colours, the wonderful quiet of that room.... Blanche lay back on the pillows; her hair was still damp, her face was white, with a livid bruise upon her cheek, her eyes looked hollow, dark, unspeakably weary.... And she was horrible to him. She was like the daughter of Jairus.... Dead and restored to life.... Impossible to imagine where she had been, or what things had happened to her....

He entered the room softly, closing the door behind him, and the click of the latch made her turn her listless head. She looked at him without interest.

“Are you the doctor?” she asked. “I got a fierce headache....”

“No,” he said.

His voice made her frown; she stared at him with those sombre, hollow eyes.

“Are you able to talk?” he asked. “To understand me....?” She did not answer, only stared. And then she gave a hoarse outcry.

“Mrs. Patrell! O Gawd ...?”

“Hush!” said Branscombe. “Do you want to ruin Charles Patrell utterly?”

“Him ...?” she said.

“You’ve done enough harm already. I don’t know if it will be possible to undo it.”

“I came here to get someone to help him—”

“You couldn’t have done anything worse. I’ve been talking to Mrs. Patrell. Apparently you’ve put it into her mind that there should be a search made for Patrell. Don’t you realize what that will mean?”

“Aren’t you ...?” she began, but her voice was so unsteady that she paused a moment. “Aren’t you—Mr. Brown?”

“Yes.”

“Then it was *you* that sent Jerry ...” she said, and began to tremble, as if in a mortal chill.

“Jerry?” he repeated. “I don’t know what you mean. I didn’t send anyone to you.”

“He said so! He said Mr. Brown sent him.”

He looked at her, shivering, exhausted, weeping, and he hated her as he had never hated before. That his life should be in danger from her...

“You’re out of your mind,” he said, contemptuously. “Who is this ‘Jerry’?”

“No,” she said. “No ... I couldn’t tell you.... Would you please ask Mrs. Patrell will she—come back.... I don’t—feel good.”

“See here!” he said. “Do you want to cause Patrell’s death?”

“Death?” she repeated, in a whisper, staring at him.

“Exactly. He’s in very great danger. He’s hiding from the police.”

“What did he do?”

“You’ll have to ask him yourself. That is, if you ever see him again. He thought you’d stay in the hotel. I know that he hoped he would manage somehow to see you there. But now.... Now that you’ve come here, and started a search for him, you’re not likely to see him again.”

“Oh, what ever can I do! It was only because I was so worried and scared.... They tried to *kill* me!”

Her eyes were filled with a dreadful vision.

“They wanted to *kill* me.... And I can’t understand.... I haven’t any money. I haven’t done any harm to anybody. I don’t know why anybody’d want to kill me.... Unless it was a plot.... And with Charles gone, and me not knowing where he was.... It seemed so lonely and—awful....”

“Your reasoning isn’t very clear, is it?” said Branscombe, with a faint smile. “As far as I’m able to understand, you got tired of waiting for Patrell, and you went off with some other man.”

“He said *you* sent him.”

“Life must be difficult,” said Branscombe, “for such a trusting creature as you. Do you always believe everything that everyone tells you? Don’t try to deceive me. You went

out with some stranger. You had an unpleasant experience of some sort. And you've deliberately involved Patrell."

"I didn't! I didn't! I was so worried about him—"

"You may well be. Poor devil! I'm sorry for him. He was going to try to see you at that hotel, at great risk to himself. Very likely he went there last night and learned that you'd gone off with another man."

She sat up in bed. She was certainly too thin, but her neck and shoulders had lovely, delicate lines, her skin was white and soft.... His words wounded her, and he was glad.

"How can I tell Charles? Oh, please help me! How can I see Charles?"

"I don't know," he said. "I don't care. He'll communicate with me, of course, but I'm not going to add to his distress by telling him that you had the effrontery to come here— here to his wife's house. He'd rather see you dead than under the same roof with his wife and daughter."

"Well, I wish to Gawd I *was* dead!" she cried, in her anguish.

"You're not dead, though. You're alive, and making the trouble you can."

"How can I make it right again? What can I do?"

She was wringing her hands; she was trembling, ghastly pale. He was glad.

"I could help you," he said, "but I won't. You're not worth it. I'm going now. I'll warn Patrell that you've started the police on his trail."

"Let me see Charles, just once...."

As he moved toward the door she got out of bed and followed him, seized his arm.

“Give me a chance to see Charles ...” she said. “I beg and *pray*....”

He looked at her.

“If I could trust you—” he said.

“You can! You can! I swear to Gawd—”

“You’ll do exactly as I say?”

“I swear to Gawd I’ll do exactly like you tell me.”

“All right,” said Branscombe, and wanted to laugh. Once again he had saved himself.

CHAPTER XXI

Hilda sat on the veranda railing, and Coralie stood beside her. They were both looking out over the lawn, with a curious similarity of expression. Branscombe, regarding them from the doorway, thought that they looked somehow as if they were on a ship, sailing for some unknown destination with matter-of-fact courage.

A dreadful grief seized him. Branscombe could never set off like that, free and calm. He was irrevocably entangled in a web; every move he made was potentially dangerous. And always would be. The crime he had committed had set in motion consequences he could not foresee, an endless chain of them. He wanted to get back, to return to his old world, where he had been free and safe. He thought if only he could undo what was done, could only get back, he would make his life a magnificent thing. He would enjoy every hour; he would be happier than any man had ever been.

But he never could. He would have to finish his days with this atrocious oppression for ever weighing upon him. And he felt a sick envy of Hilda, sitting there in the sun with her child.

“Hilda,” he said, “may I have a word with you?”

They both turned, so much alike; in the child’s brown eyes, in Hilda’s sea-blue ones, so much the same steadfast appraisal. Hilda went with him into the drawing-room, and because danger sharpened his senses, he was aware of a change in her. She was not hostile, but she was remote.

“I can’t help it,” he thought. “I have no time to worry about a woman’s moods....” He hated women then, all

women. “Hilda,” he said, “I’ve been talking to that unfortunate girl. She—naturally, she talked more freely to me than she would to you.”

“Why?”

“She’s more accustomed to talking to men,” he said, and again his secret venom coloured his tone. “She spoke very much more freely to me than she’d ever speak to you. She’s ashamed of herself, and properly so, for coming here at all. And she mustn’t stay here another hour.”

“She’s too ill to leave. And I don’t feel as you do about this, Andrew. Charles and I have been separated for ten years. I never imagined he was living like a monk. I’m not shocked, I’m not distressed—except on her account.”

“Obviously we have different standards,” he said stiffly. “But that’s not the point. On Coralie’s account, you can’t have a scandal.”

“There needn’t be a scandal if she stays quietly here until she’s better.”

“You don’t understand the situation. The girl got into bad company last night. They’d all been drinking, and there was some sort of disgraceful brawl. The police will probably investigate. No matter how indifferent you are to public opinion, you can’t want the police to find your husband’s mistress here.”

“I’m not going to turn her out while she’s ill and wretched.”

“I had no intention of suggesting your ‘turning her out,’ ” he said, more and more stiff and frigid. “I propose to take her home with me until she’s well enough to go back—to her old life.”

“But, Andrew!” she exclaimed. “Think ...! What about Eva?”

“Eva has a good deal of confidence in me. Eva is able to believe that I’m not only level-headed, but fairly humane.”

“Andrew, I’m sorry. It’s really very generous of you....” She was contrite now. Well, let her be. She had been suspicious, troublesome, hostile, and he did not forgive her. He looked at her; he saw that she was a handsome woman, but with no more charm for him. He looked at her—and he hated her.

“She’s so worried about Charles, Andrew. Don’t you think we’d better make enquiries?”

“Make enquiries?” he repeated. “Good God, Hilda, what are you thinking of? Can’t you see what this girl is? A common—”

“Please don’t!” she interrupted.

He controlled himself with an effort.

“You don’t understand that type,” he said. “Half of what she says is—” He wanted to say “a lie,” but he dared not further antagonize Hilda. “She’s hopelessly muddled-headed. Stupid and ignorant. I’ll take her back with me now.”

“She’s terribly worried about Charles. And it is odd, Andrew. When I went to the address he’d given me, the landlady said he’d gone to Montreal—with his—‘wife.’ ... Then I got a letter from some woman saying she’d gone away with Charles, but Blanche says she didn’t write that letter.”

“She did, though,” said Branscombe. “She told me about that. Her brother came to tell her their mother was seriously ill. They started for the train, taking all the luggage along,

but on the way they stopped at her brother's room, and then they got another message that the mother was very much better."

"But then what happened to Charles?"

"My dear girl," said Branscombe, "if I were you, I shouldn't enquire too closely into Patrell's affairs. He may simply be trying to shake off this girl. Or there may be other reasons.... After she's rested, I can talk to her. But in the meantime, there's nothing to worry about. I'll try to find out what muddle-headed ideas she has, and we'll see...." He paused a moment. "If you think that I'm likely to be brutal, at least you can have confidence, can't you, that Eva will behave with common decency?"

That finished it. With those words the nebulous relationship between himself and Hilda Patrell came to an end. They both knew it; they looked at each other, a long, clear look, without illusion.

She thanked him again for his offer, and went upstairs to find out if Blanche wanted to go with him. She found the girl sitting on the edge of the bed, pulling on her wet stockings, and at the sight of her, so frail and pretty, so strangely helpless, pity overwhelmed her.

"You mustn't do that!" she said. "I can lend you dry things—if you're *sure* you want to go with Mr. Branscombe."

"Mr. Branscombe?"

"He's just been speaking to you."

"Oh yes, thank you!" said Blanche. "I do want to go with him. But—I'll never, all my days, forget how nice and sweet you've been. I *wish* I knew how to tell you how I feel.... I wouldn't of done anything to worry you or the little girl for

anything.... Only....” A sob stopped her. “Life is so kind of mixed up, isn’t it?”

Hilda stood silent for a moment.

“It *is* hard to say what one wants to say.... Just please know that I’m not offended or hurt.... I’m only sorry.... If I can help you—ever....”

She went away hastily; she brought back stockings, underwear, a fresh white dress, and white shoes. She helped the girl to get ready.

“You’ll let me hear from you to-morrow?” she asked. “Please ring me up....”

From the doorway she watched Blanche go along the path in the bright morning sunshine, holding Branscombe’s arm. And she wanted to cry, because of her pity for the poor young creature, and because Andrew had gone, for ever. He had never really existed, that strong, quiet, upright man.

“He’s petty,” she thought. “He’s narrow and petty—and cruel.... And I’ve been a fool—again.”

She sat down to breakfast with Coralie, and she was beyond measure thankful for her child’s quietness. No questions, no excitement.

“Uncle Vincent’s coming early, Mother,” she said. “He’s going to take me to see a sailboat.”

Hilda looked up.

“Do you like him, Coralie?”

“A *lot*,” answered Coralie.

“Why?”

“Well ...” said Coralie, “because he’s—decent....”

It was an odd word to use, thought Hilda; it lingered in her mind. “Decent.”

“Andrew isn’t ‘decent,’ ” she thought, “with that savage contempt he has for poor Blanche. And I’m afraid Charles isn’t ‘decent’ either. But Vincent wouldn’t be contemptuous, and he’d never be careless and selfish and—false.... He’s irritating, but he’s admirable.”

Coralie was not quite ready when Colton stopped for her, and he lit a cigarette and sat on the veranda, with his air of illimitable patience. For ten years he had been patient, thought Hilda; for ten years he had kept steadfastly to his hope of reconciling Charles and herself. He must have come here now to make another attempt. It was stupid, yet it was somehow endearing. She glanced at his impassive face, and she spoke on impulse.

“Vincent ... I wish you’d tell me candidly why you’re here.”

He was long in answering.

“I suppose—I’ve got to ...” he said. “It’s a bit hard.... You’re angry at me already, and you’ll be still more angry when you know.... I’m not going to stay here, Hilda. I promised Coralie I’d get her a boat and show her something about sailing it.... Doesn’t do to disappoint a kid.... But old Ketcham says he’ll look after her—and I’ll clear out....”

“*Why* did you come?” she demanded. Her tone was a little imperious, but she could be imperious with him, if she chose.

“I had rather a row with Charles,” he said. “He had an idea I couldn’t stand ... It’s time I told you, but I don’t enjoy the prospect.... Y’see, Hilda, Charles was—interested in a girl.... I never saw her, but from what he told me, I got the

impression that she was—well, not a bad sort of girl. Pretty stupid, but faithful and affectionate.... In ordinary circumstances, I believe in minding my own business, but in this instance ... I didn't like his—his ideas and I said so....”

“Vincent!” she protested. “I'm not a schoolgirl. Do please speak plainly.”

“Always my difficulty,” he said. “I'm not much good at talking. But—well—he said that *if* he were free, he'd marry this girl. I... You may think it was disloyal of me, Hilda, but I give you my word it wasn't. It was you I was thinking of. In the beginning, as you know, I was always hoping to see you and Charles together again. But—not lately. Charles has changed. I mean to say—he has fine qualities. But—”

“I understand Charles,” she said, a little sorrowfully. “You needn't defend him to me. But I wish you'd be more definite.”

“Yes ... I'm getting to it, Hilda, in a dam' clumsy way.... Charles said he wanted to marry this girl. Said that what he needed was a wife who'd never—well—never criticise him. I couldn't see anything against that. I couldn't believe that you'd ever be happy with Charles again. I advised him to tell you the truth. I told him I was sure you'd let him go—give him a divorce. But he had this idea.... He sent this fellow he knew out here, to pick up gossip. About you. So that's what I couldn't stand.... The fellow he sent came back with a tale —”

“What tale, Vincent?”

He looked up at her, with misery in his grey eyes.

“About you—and this Branscombe chap. Of course, I know there's nothing in it—but Charles ... he.... Well, he's

changed.... He ... I don't believe he'd actually have done it, Hilda, not after he'd thought it over.... But he said he'd threaten you with divorce proceedings—and the loss of Coralie.... And that ... that finished our friendship.”

They were both silent for a time.

“I came out here.... My idea was to warn you. But I couldn't. Couldn't make up my mind even to mention this thing.... At first, I thought perhaps I'd say a word to Branscombe, if he was the right sort of man. But after I'd seen him—”

“You don't think him—the right sort of man, Vincent?”

“No,” he answered simply. “Well, now I've told you, Hilda. I...” He rose. “I shan't come back,” he said, “unless you need me.”

“But I want you to come back, Vincent! You're an old friend.... I've always been fond of you. There's no need for you to be melodramatic.”

“I feel a bit that way,” he said.

“What do you *mean*?”

He looked straight at her.

“Whole thing's been a bit melodramatic,” he said.

“Charles was my friend. The first time he brought me to see you, it was bad enough. I mean—to feel the way I did about it. Girl my friend was going to marry.... Like a book.... I knew I simply had to stand it. I hoped I'd get over it. But I never have.”

“Vincent!”

“I never shall.”

“Vincent—you shan't—just go away....”

“I’ve got to.”

“No,” she said, and again she was imperious to him, as she had never been to any other man. “I’m worried and unhappy—and alone. I need you. I want you to come back to dinner.”

“All right, Hilda,” he said, with a sigh.

CHAPTER XXII

Branscombe made Blanche sit beside him in the front of the car, so that he could talk to her. He saw that, in her present condition of exhaustion and wretchedness, he would have to repeat all his reassurances and all his directions over and over, until things were indelibly stamped upon her mind.

“I don’t know who this fellow Jerry was,” he said. “Some enemy of Patrell’s, I suppose. But anyhow, you’re safe now. And if you do as I tell you, I’ll try to arrange for you to meet Patrell. But you’ve got to be careful on his account. You’ll meet my sister presently. Now, listen to me! You must not mention Patrell’s name to her. D’you understand? You must not tell her anything about last night. You must not let her know about my calling myself ‘Mr. Brown.’ If you do, you’ll be signing Patrell’s death-warrant.”

She believed him. She was too dazed to notice any discrepancies; moreover, she was impressed by his position in the world. He was a friend of Mrs. Patrell’s, and Mrs. Patrell was to her a creature of supernatural goodness.

“All right,” she said.

Branscombe smiled to himself at her stupidity, and his own astounding audacity. Only the utmost boldness could have saved him, and he had been bold.

“Wait here in the car until I speak to my sister,” he said. “Naturally I shan’t tell her what sort of woman you are. And try to behave with a little decency—if you can.”

That made her cry again, but he didn’t care how much she cried. He found Eva going over the household accounts for

the week; she was a little flushed with the worry of this, and somewhat distraught at first.

“I’ve brought a—woman ...” he said.

“That’s nice....”

“It’s very far from ‘nice,’ ” he said. “I’m.... It’s hard to tell you this, Eva....”

He had succeeded in alarming her now.

“What is it, Andy?”

“You remember that I told you about an unfortunate girl whose rent I paid?”

“You mean—?”

“Yes. That girl of Evans’s.... I’m sorry, Eva ... I’m very sorry even to speak of this thing again. But it was my mistake, ever showing her any sort of kindness. It doesn’t pay, with people like that.... Last night she got herself into serious trouble. Some drunken party.... I won’t go into details.... But she was assaulted and robbed, and she turned to *me*. She telephoned to me from the railway station.... And I couldn’t see anything to do, at the moment, except to bring her here. After she’s rested a little I’ll give her some money, and she can go.”

“Does Llewellyn know?”

“She doesn’t want him to know. She says he’d be angry at her. Apparently she doesn’t expect any help or sympathy from him.” He glanced at Eva’s face. “I gave her my word I’d say nothing to him. And of course you won’t either. No use in making matters worse for her.”

“I *can’t* think he’s like that—cruel and heartless!”

“My dear girl, you don’t understand. I’m glad you don’t. In an affair like that, there’s no question of kindness, even of

decency.”

She turned away. “Shall we take her up to the guest-room?”

“Certainly not! She can lie on the sofa in the library. Tell the servants that she’s a maid of some friend of yours who’s been in an automobile accident.”

He had to help Blanche into the house, and he hated to touch her. His fingers gripped her fragile arm so tightly that she winced. Eva stood in the doorway, and, as Branscombe helped his most wretched enemy up the steps, the two girls looked at each other. It was intolerable. He could not endure Eva’s looking at this creature. He made Blanche hurry along the hall.

“Sit down on the couch,” he said. “Try to pull yourself together, so that you’ll be able to go and see Patrell.”

He stopped with those words on his lips. For it had come into his head that that was just what she was going to do. She was going to join Patrell. He had known it for days, but he had not faced it. From the moment when he had seen her outside Hilda’s house he had known what must happen to Blanche if he were to live. It was inevitable. Yet his present clear and definite realization was a shock to him.

He would have to do this thing himself, alone. And, though he had no pity for the girl, it was an awful thing....

“Could I have a cigarette, Mr. Brown?” she asked.

He took a packet out of his pocket and tossed it to her. It fell on the floor, and she had to pick it up herself.

“I’m not going to wait on that hussy,” he thought.

She had taken off the hat Hilda had lent her; she was lying uncomfortably enough on the couch. But he would not fetch

a pillow for her; he would not wait on her. He would not pretend to any compassion.

“I’ll tell the house-maid to bring you some soup, milk, something of the sort,” he said.

“No, thank you, Mr. Brown. I don’t want—”

“You’ve got to,” he said curtly. “You’ve got to get enough strength to leave here.”

He went out of the room, closing the door behind him.

“O God ...!” he said to himself. “*Why* does it have to be like this ...?”

If only he could get away, be free again, even for an hour... But he could not go, leaving her alive. He could not live if she lived. He went up to his own room and locked himself in; he was trembling.

“But—it’s the law of life ...” he thought. “Nature’s law... The strong and the clever are obliged to—destroy in order to exist. She’s worth nothing, absolutely nothing, to anyone.... I’ve got Eva to look after. I’m a man of education and standing. Once this is over, I’ll do some sort of useful work...”

He thought about that. He would never return to his writing; he could see now that that was futile.

“I can encourage artists, writers, musicians,” he thought. “I’ll put aside a certain percentage of my income for that purpose. I’m not creative myself, but I have taste, a genuine appreciation of the arts. I’ll find young men who are struggling for recognition...”

The idea grew upon him. In the autumn he would take a house instead of an apartment; he would form a group of

young artists; he would be their patron. Lorenzo the Magnificent.... It was a Renaissance conception.

“It suits my character,” he thought.

He thought, too, that when he came to die, he would leave a written confession. It would be the most astounding document of the century; it would shake the modern world to its depths. This man, famous for his patronage, his profound understanding of the arts, had taken two human lives.... He had felt no compunction, because he was above the paltry modern morality. He had never even been suspected, because he had been unbelievably bold and subtle. The task before him was—unpleasant. But in a few hours it would be over. The others who worried him he could manage well enough: Jerry, Evans, Colton. If it seemed necessary, he would deal with Jerry as with Blanche....

Colton disturbed him. He could understand Jerry and Evans; he knew what they wanted. But he was entirely in the dark about Colton. He could not divine the man’s character or his motives for coming here; he was aware only of a vague hostility between them.

“He’s a fool, of course,” he thought. “I wonder....” Something new was beginning to take shape in his mind; he had again that feeling of inspiration. He stood by the open window, and rapidly and lucidly his plan developed. It was so masterly that he felt a sort of awe. It would settle everything.

Eva knocked at his door.

“Lunch, Andy!” she said.

He opened his door at once. He had no desire, no need to hide himself.

“Andy.... Is she coming to lunch?”

“Certainly not! Send her a tray.”

“I went in to see if she wanted anything. Andy, she seems—so miserable.”

“Of course she’s miserable,” he said with a frown. “I wish you’d keep away from her, Eva.”

“She won’t do me any harm,” said Eva, in a tone he had not heard before. He saw that he had better say no more. They sat down at the table together. And somehow it was all wrong, this isolation, this orderly, chilly life.

“I’ve got to give her more than this,” he thought. “I can’t expect her to be satisfied with this.”

He began talking about a trip to Bali. She was polite, but she was not enthusiastic. It would take a little time, he thought, for her to get over her inconvenient infatuation for Evans and the shock of her disappointment. She was constrained and unhappy....

“Andy!” she said suddenly, and with an obvious effort.

“Yes?”

“Are you sure—absolutely sure that that poor girl has told you the truth?”

“No,” he answered, instantly on his guard. “I shouldn’t imagine she ever told the truth.”

“But are you sure that—that Mr. Evans really is—involved?”

“Oh, I’m sure enough of *that*. Why do you ask?”

“You say she telephoned you from the station.... Did she say she’d just come from New York by train?”

“What’s this?” he asked himself, in fear. And aloud:
“That’s what I understood. Did she tell you anything—?”

“No.... But I’m sure she’s wearing a dress of Mrs. Patrell’s. I recognized it at once.”

His mouth was dry, his throat constricted.

“Impossible!” he said. “You know yourself that those dresses are turned out by the thousand.”

“Mrs. Patrell has hers made by a dressmaker. And, I’m sure—”

A scream rang through the house—a scream of wild and uncontrolled terror.

CHAPTER XXIII

They both sprang to their feet. But instantly Branscombe's brain was alert to defend him. It was Blanche who cried out like that, and Blanche was a constant menace to him.

"Wait here!" he said, to Eva.

But she did not obey; as he hastened down the hall, she was with him. They found Blanche sitting up on the couch, staring out of the window, her dark eyes dilated.

"O Gawd!" she cried. "He's *right here!* The man that tried to kill me!"

It was Jerry, loitering in the road.

"Hush!" said Branscombe. "You're perfectly safe here...."

"Andy, who is that?" asked Eva in a low tone. "He's hanging around here so much...."

"I don't know," he answered, his own voice lowered.

"But I've seen you speaking to him."

It was intolerable that Eva should worry him like this, when he was so hard pressed. He drew her aside.

"If you must know," he whispered, "it's a detective."

"Andy ...!"

"Don't bother me now!" he said, and turned again to Blanche. "Try to control yourself," he said. "There's no reason for behaving like this, and upsetting the whole house."

"But that's the man! That's—"

"I'll speak to him. Sit down and be quiet."

He spoke to her with the contempt he felt; he knew Eva was surprised, but he couldn't help it.

“Leave her alone, Eva!” he said. “She’s hysterical!”

But again Eva didn’t obey; she sat down on the couch beside Blanche; she took the girl’s trembling hand in hers. Branscombe gave them a sidelong glance and went out to Jerry. In the few moments it took him to cross the sunny lawn he had come to an important decision.

Jerry would have to go, like Blanche. And he saw how to do it. Every detail fell neatly into place. He saw how he could save himself, and so great a relief filled him that he was joyous.

“Well!” he said.

“I thought you’d want me to come,” said Jerry. “I thought you’d want to hear all what happened—all I done.”

They faced each other with a serious wariness.

“Does he know that I know the truth?” thought Branscombe. “Or will he lie and try to collect the money?”

“I fell down on the job,” said Jerry. “I didn’t handle it right.”

This candour was a little surprising.

“You mean you couldn’t induce this person to leave the country?”

“Sure! That’s what I mean,” said Jerry. “I tried. I took a lot of time and trouble, but it went wrong on me.”

“And now?”

“Now,” said Jerry, “I’ll have another try.”

It seemed to Branscombe as if the stars fought for him. This was exactly what he wanted.

“Just what happened last night?”

“She nearly got run over,” said Jerry. “But another car comes along, and she gets away.”

“Where has she gone?”

“I wouldn’t know. But I’ll find out.”

“How will you find out?”

“She’ll go back to that hotel to get her things. I got a friend of mine there now, to let me know where she goes and to trail her.”

“And what will you do when you find her?”

Jerry smiled.

“What will you do when you find her?” Branscombe repeated. He wanted to make Jerry commit himself, if it could be done.

“I’ll wr-ring her n-eck ...” said Jerry, between closed teeth.

“D’you mean that?”

“Try me!” said Jerry.

“I did try you once.”

“This time I’ll finish the job, all right. As soon as I find her.”

“I can find her for you,” said Branscombe. “If I were sure of you....”

“Listen, mister! Gimme five minutes alone with her, and I’ll wring her neck.”

There was for Branscombe an ineffable relief and satisfaction in this interview, in the fact that there was no need for disguise now. The masks were off; Jerry was frank in his savagery; there was no pretence about Blanche’s fate.

“A bullet is better,” he said.

“Unless you got a gun with a silencer, it’s no good.”

“There are places where no one could hear a shot.”

“Yeah! Just try and get her any place like that! She’s scared now.”

“I can get her anywhere I want her,” said Branscombe.

“Now? After what happened?”

“Yes.”

Jerry stared at him.

“I got to hand it to you,” he said slowly. “I never *seen* a guy like you.”

His sincere admiration warmed Branscombe’s soul. In all his life no one had ever really admired him before. Eva was fond of him, but she was fond of him for those qualities in which he had the least pride. What Jerry admired was his boldness, his ingenuity....

“If you’ll do the job exactly as I tell you,” he said, “you won’t get three thousand.”

“Say!” protested Jerry.

“You’ll get five thousand—in cash. I’ll bring it with me.”

“Now you’re talking. What’s the idea, boss?”

“I’ll bring her,” said Branscombe, “to that barn where you went.”

“*There?*” said Jerry, staring at him again. “I can find some other place.”

“No. That place happens to suit me. I’ve got a revolver with me in my pocket. Here! Use this. I want you to go to that barn at nine o’clock exactly. Not five minutes before, or after. She’ll be in there, alone.... A few minutes after nine I’ll come—with the money. And you’ll get your five thousand if—you’ve earned it.”

Branscombe spoke in an even, steady tone, but a light sweat broke out on his forehead. It seemed to him incredible that Jerry should not see through this ... Jerry was experienced in every human baseness; surely he would at least see the possibility here for treachery, for double-crossing.

“Unless,” thought Branscombe, “he’s going to try to double-cross me himself. But I don’t see how he can. Even if he had some witness of his own there, what could he point against me? But doesn’t he suspect—anything ...?”

“O.K.,” said Jerry.

“You mean you’re going to try—”

“Try? I’ll do the job. What would stop me?”

“You’ll be there at nine sharp?”

“On the dot. And if she’s there—” He grinned again.

The incredible thing had happened.

“I can manage anyone,” thought Branscombe, with a great wonder. “Everyone believes me. Everyone trusts me. I never imagined before that I was—this sort of man. I might have lived all my life and never known what was in me!”

He watched Jerry out of sight, and he thought that after tonight he would never be bothered by Jerry again. After tonight all his troubles would be over.

There must be absolutely no mistakes made now, though. Every detail would have to be arranged with the greatest care.

“Eva’s first,” he thought. Because, after all, Eva was the only human creature for whom he had an affection.

She was still in the library with Blanche; he frowned at the sight, and called her out of the room.

“This is damned awkward, Eva,” he said. “I’ve been talking to that detective.... He’s been following the girl for some time, and now he wants to arrest her.”

“What for?”

“Shop-lifting. She recognised him, of course....”

“She said it was a man who tried to kill her—”

“My dear girl, you can’t be so pitifully naive as to believe what she says! Please try to think straight for a moment. We don’t want her around here, in my home.”

“I don’t want her around at all. She’s ill, and she’s.... Even if she really is a shop-lifter, I’m sure she’s not—criminal. Can’t we help her?”

“If she’s around here, she’s certain to tell her story about Evans. There’ll be a disgraceful scandal altogether. It’ll ruin him. Personally, I don’t care. But if you’re still interested in him....”

He waited, and after a moment she said:

“Yes.... Yes, I am.”

Her words shocked him, and hurt him. But he had to endure it.

“I was afraid of that,” he said. “I’ve acted against my better judgment—against my principles, Eva, on your account. I know it would be painful to you to see the fellow’s wretchedness made public. I’m sorry—sorry beyond words that you’re so blind about him—but I hope you’ll get over it.... The detective had traced the girl here, and I lied to him. I swore she’d never come here. And because I’m not a liar, because I have a reputation for honesty, he believed me. He’s gone. But he’ll be back. If she’s still here then—”

“Where can she go? How can she get away?”

“She’ll know where to go. It’s better for us not to know in case we’re questioned. I’ll give her some money.”

“You’ll give her—enough, won’t you, Andy? She’s so ill ___”

He had never been so hurt in his life.

“You haven’t a very high opinion of me, have you, Eva?” he asked unsteadily. “You think I’m petty and mean and hard....”

“It’s not that, Andy. It’s only that—you’re so—so upright yourself that you’re apt to expect too much of other people.”

This was not the right tone to assuage his hurt. Eva was simply being kind. She didn’t really admire him.

“I wish to God she knew what I really am,” he thought.

Not petty, not mean, but magnificent! A man who could be ruthless when it was necessary, but who could be superbly generous. She must be made to see that.

“Eva,” he said, “I realize how hard this situation is for you ... I want to do what I can.... Wouldn’t it divert you a little to spend some money? Buy some clothes, and so on ...? I’ll write you a cheque now, for a thousand dollars.”

“What?” she cried. “Andy! A thousand ...!”

“Do what you like with it,” he said. “There’s always more for you, Eva.”

He wrote the cheque and handed it to her; he saw in her face more amazement than gratitude. But later, after he had done more things like this....

He went into the library and closed the door behind him, stood looking at Blanche, while she looked back at him, with her great, hollow dark eyes.

“I’m so dam’ sick of her ...” he thought.

“Did you speak to him ...?” she asked.

“Yes. You’ve got yourself—and Patrell—into a nice mess. This fellow is Patrell’s worst enemy—and you have no more sense than to go out with him—”

“But how would that hurt Charles?”

It wasn’t necessary to take much trouble with her; she would believe anything.

“You’ll have to wait for an explanation until you see Patrell,” he said. “That is, if we can manage a meeting at all.”

“But what’s *happened* to Charles?” she cried. “If you’d only tell me—”

“I’m not going to,” said Branscombe; “you’re not to be trusted. On Patrell’s account, I’ll do what I can. If you make one single mistake, you’ll never see him again.”

She was confused and frightened and miserable, but it didn’t matter. It would soon be finished.

“She’ll really be better off dead,” thought Branscombe.

Then he told her what to do. She was to go at once to the station and take a train to New York. But she was to get out at the next station down the line and go to a small hotel there, and get a room.

“And wait,” he said. “Register as Miss Brown again. Stay in your room and hold your tongue until you hear from me.”

“I don’t know if I’m well enough,” she said. “I do feel terrible weak.”

“Snap out of it!” he said. “You’ve got to go. I’ll get you a taxi to the station. Here’s some money. Pull yourself together

now. Get up!”

He felt a furious impatience with her. She was such a nuisance. He wished she were dead now. When she got up she was so unsteady, so white—people would notice her....

“I’ll give you a drink of whisky,” he said.

“I never drink.”

“You’ll drink this,” he said. “Take this flask with you. I’ll wrap it up. If you feel too weak, take another drink now and then. For God’s sake, don’t be so—spiritless!”

The taxi came and she went out of the house, alone. When she was told that she had to “pull herself together,” she did. Branscombe watched her from the window, and he gave a sigh of relief. She had started on her last journey.

CHAPTER XXIV

He telephoned to Hilda.

“Hilda,” he said, in a voice as blank, as expressionless as he could make it. “How can I get in touch with Colton?”

“But—with Vincent ...? But why?”

He was sick and tired of these women with their questions. “I can’t explain now,” he said. “Only that it’s a matter of importance. If you’ll give me his address, please.”

“I... If it’s anything you’re doing for me, Andrew,” she said, “please talk to me about it first. I’ve changed my point of view about a great many things lately...”

He disliked her so much that he could scarcely keep his tone civil.

“Self-righteous prude ...!” he called her to himself. “What did I ever see in *her*?” And aloud: “It’s not anything that concerns you personally,” he said.

She gave him Colton’s address, and he got out his car at once and drove out there. It was a little wooden shack, bleached by the sun, standing on a wide beach. A cheap little place, and Branscombe despised it. He despised Colton, too, and he was going to make a dupe of him.

It was an intolerable exasperation to find Coralie there, sitting on the steps with Colton. They both said good-morning to him, but obviously they were not glad to see him.

“Nice day ...” Colton observed, looking out over the glistening water.

“Very ...” said Branscombe. “I’d like a word with you, Colton...”

“Very well ...” said Colton. “Coralie—mind waiting a while?”

She shook her head; her hair was shining in the sun; her eyes looked wonderfully clear in her sunburned face. She rose and strolled off; the two men looked after her in silence for a moment.

“A very awkward and distressing situation has developed,” said Branscombe. “I came to you—” Because you’re hostile to me, and I’ve got to destroy whatever suspicion you may have, you fool, he thought. He left the sentence unfinished, waiting for Colton to question him. But Colton said nothing.

“As you’re a friend of Patrell’s,” said Branscombe, “I presume you know about this woman ...?”

“Er—yes ...” said Colton. “Yes.”

“She’s disposed to make trouble. You knew that she’d come here this morning?”

“Yes, Hilda told me.”

“I took her to my house. It seemed to me necessary to get her away from Hilda as soon as possible... Hilda has no understanding whatever of the situation. Nothing but a sentimental pity for the girl.”

“The girl had a pitiable sort of story—”

“Naturally. She’s an experienced liar. I took her back to my house—with a good deal of reluctance. I didn’t much like having her under the same roof with my sister... I talked to her, and she was candid enough. She tried to extort money from me.”

“How?”

“It’s a damned unpleasant story.... Perhaps I’ve done wrong. I don’t know.... My only object was to protect Hilda.... I’ve been paying blackmail to a man for some days.”

“Explain it, will you?”

Colton sat down on the steps again and lit his pipe. Branscombe glanced at him, and with a sort of exultation he felt that he could read this man like an open book, could play upon his feelings, do as he pleased with him.

“You’re probably aware,” he said, “of my—interest in Hilda. I had no idea that she was still married. She never told me. I went to see her practically every day. I didn’t see any reason for concealing what I felt.... Well, a few days ago a fellow came from God knows where. He told me he’d collected what he called ‘evidence.’ ... He knew the dates of the different drives we’d taken together. He knew of the times when Coralie and the servants were out, and Hilda and I spent the evenings alone in her house. Other things, too.... He told me he would be able to sell his information—elsewhere—unless I was ready to pay him to keep quiet. I paid him.”

Colton’s sunburned face flushed darkly.

“You paid him?” he said. “That’s not the way to deal with a cur like that.”

This was exactly the right way for him to speak, and to feel.

“Perhaps not,” said Branscombe. “But I’m not a man of action.... I couldn’t see any other way to protect Hilda from a scandal.”

“Well, there is another way,” said Colton. He rose, and walked up and down, with his slight limp. “Did this fellow

say where he expected to sell his information?”

“To you.”

“To me, by God! I wish he’d tried it!”

“You see,” Branscombe went on, “I knew nothing about you, except that you were a friend of Patrell’s. Even after I’d met you, I couldn’t size you up. I don’t mean any offence to you. It’s simply that I can’t make a snap judgment. I had to make up my mind about you.”

He saw that Colton was impressed by his manly, straightforward tone.

“The situation’s got beyond me now,” he continued. “The girl’s taking a hand in it, too. She wants money, but she wants revenge still more. She’s wild with jealousy. She came here with her cock-and-bull story, just to see what Hilda was like. And now she’d do anything she could to injure her... Of course, you know Patrell, and I don’t. It’s possible that she has a grossly distorted view of him. But she thinks he’ll be glad to get this information, and that he will use it to Hilda’s detriment.”

“You mean that she and this fellow are working together?”

“Yes. They’ve given me an ultimatum. I’m to meet the man to-night, and give him five thousand in cash.... I’d do that willingly if I thought it would end the matter. But I don’t think so. He’ll be back for more. Frankly I don’t see what to do.”

“Suppose you let me take a hand in this,” said Colton.

Branscombe turned his head to conceal his triumph. Everyone did exactly as he wished; everyone believed what he chose they should believe.

“I shouldn’t be sorry if you did,” he said. “My idea was this. I’ll meet this man, as I agreed. I’ll have the money with me, in marked bills. I’ll hand it over to him, and let him walk out of the place. Then, if you’re waiting outside, you can be my witness that he’s taken the money. We can threaten him then with the police—”

“I shan’t bother with the police,” said Colton. “Just a few moments alone—with your friend....”

“Typical soldier,” thought Branscombe. “He didn’t even notice all the holes in my story.... Blundering, pig-headed fool! I couldn’t have a better witness.”

It was possible that Colton would have a role more memorable than that of witness.... It was possible that Colton would die. But his death would be merely incidental. Branscombe did not mind if he lived; he was indifferent.

His plan was this: a little before nine he would bring Blanche to the barn, and he would shoot her. He was a good shot; he would not fail with one bullet at such close quarters. He would leave her there and go to fetch Colton. When he and Colton arrived, Jerry would be in there alone with Blanche. Branscombe would enter, would pretend to believe that Jerry had finished his job, would pay him.

He intended to be dramatic, then. He rehearsed the words he would speak.

“Here’s your money.... You’d better get away—quick. The girl set the police after you. A detective was questioning me this afternoon.... I hope to God he didn’t follow me to-night. If he did, you’ll walk into his arms when you leave here.”

Jerry would be armed. When he left, he would walk into Colton’s arms. It was certain that he would shoot, with his

life at stake. And at the first gesture toward drawing his gun, Branscombe would shoot Jerry. And kill him. Colton would be witness to that—if he lived. If he didn't live, it would be all right, too. Branscombe's story would be convincing to the police. Hilda would be able to identify Blanche. Eva would give evidence of Jerry's hanging about, and the money would be found upon Jerry.

“You'd better come around,” said Branscombe. And he could have laughed aloud when Colton so readily agreed to that.

CHAPTER XXV

It was very hard to sit quietly at the table with Eva and eat his dinner. A violent excitement filled him; he had to repress his desire to be extraordinarily lively and talkative.

“I’m alive!” he thought. “God! Think of the years I’ve wasted ...! I’m alive now.... I’m a man.... I’ve planned the most complicated and difficult crime imaginable, and I can carry it through without a hitch....”

There would be a little more explaining to do to Eva when the case came into court. He would have to tell her that Blanche had been Patrell’s mistress as well as Evans’s. But as long as she didn’t talk to Evans, that would be all right.

“I’ve got to go out, Eva ...” he said, and made his voice so solemn, so portentous, that she glanced up—as he had intended.

“Where to, Andy?”

“I can’t tell you,” he said. “But—don’t worry....”

“Andy, please tell me!”

“I can’t. Not now....”

He left her very much worried; it had to be like that. He went into the library and took out of the safe a revolver he kept in there. He put it behind a photograph on top of the bookcase. Then he rang for the house-maid.

“You know that revolver I always keep in my desk,” he said. “I can’t find it. Look around, will you?”

She looked, and she found it. She was afraid to touch it; she was afraid of Branscombe’s distraught manner. All this would come out in the evidence. No one knew that he had two revolvers. He had bought one of them in Berlin, some

time ago, and the other he had bought in New York from an ex-soldier. He had given the German one to Jerry, and it had had two chambers empty. The house-maid couldn't say that Mr. Branscombe had taken his own gun with him.

He got out his car and drove off. There was no need to bother about an alibi. He would simply say that the coming interview with his blackmailer had made him nervous, and he had gone for a drive.

He drove to the next town and telephoned to "Miss Brown" at her hotel.

"I've arranged for you to meet Patrell," he said. "Start at once. Your hotel is on Union Street. Turn the corner into Maple Avenue and walk straight ahead until you see me—"

"Is it far?" she asked. "Because I—don't feel good...."

"You can manage it," he said. "Start at once."

She would have a good half-mile to walk, but it really didn't matter much if it tired her. He drove about for a time, then he turned into Maple Avenue, where it was dark and quiet; he went slowly until he saw her approach. She was walking with an obvious effort; people would notice how ill she looked.

"Get in quick!" he said.

When she sat down beside him she was breathing fast; she leaned against his shoulder. It didn't matter if she had fainted; in fact, it would make things easier....

But whatever was wrong with her, she got over it. "I'm really going to see Charles?" she asked.

"You're going to join him. He's waiting for you," said Branscombe, smiling to himself.

He wished that he were not quite so excited. His heart beat too fast; his brain was working too rapidly. His thoughts were lucid enough, but he was aware that he was not controlling them. He wanted to concentrate upon the task in hand, and instead of that he had curious visions of the future. He saw himself on a tropic beach with a beautiful girl. He saw himself on a magnificent black horse, galloping through the narrow streets of some old town.... Suddenly these happy visions were dispelled by fear. Suppose Colton were late, and Jerry ran away from the barn in a panic....

No. Colton would observe a military punctuality, and Jerry would not leave until he had got his money.... Everything would go as he had planned, and he would be free.... He would forget all this. It would soon be over. Only, he wished he could quiet the violent beating of his heart, banish the strange sensation he had, as if his blood had grown as cold as ice, and tingled in his veins. "In cold blood...."

"I didn't *want* to do this!" he cried to himself. "It was forced upon me. I'm doing it to save my life. And certainly my life is of infinitely more value than hers, or Jerry's...."

There would be one bad moment.... Only a moment, though. Only the instant when the revolver must be aimed, when the shot rang out....

"I think I caught cold," said Blanche. "Getting so wet ... it sort of hurts me to breathe."

He felt no sympathy, and there was no need now to pretend any. He did not answer. He fancied she was crying in a weak sort of way. Let her cry.... He turned into the lane where he had driven with Jerry that sunny morning. It seemed very long ago....

“Charles is *here?*” she said. “No! No! I don’t want to get out here!”

“I told you he was in hiding....”

“Then ask him to come out.... I don’t want to go in there.... I’m scared....”

A shot out here would be far more likely to be overheard. She had to go inside. He gave a sigh of exasperation.

“You’re not worth bothering with,” he said. “The poor devil is in there—ill. I won’t ever ask him to come out. If you’re too much of a coward to go in and see him, very well. I’ll go in and tell him so, and you can sit here in the car.”

“It’s a terrible lonely place,” she said, and her teeth were chattering. “There’s no light.... Is he in there—all alone ... in the dark ...?”

“Is he ...?” thought Branscombe. “What did Jerry do with him? Bury him ...? Or is he—is he—*still there?*”

He had not thought of that before. He wished with all his soul that he had not thought of it now. It unnerved him; it made his knees turn to water. He could not—look at *that*....

“Why don’t you answer me?” she cried, with a sudden vehemence that startled him. “You—you are so queer—and so mean to me.... What’s Charles *doing* in that dark old barn ...?”

With an immense effort Branscombe recovered himself.

“He’s got a light in there. But naturally it’s hidden from the road. Are you going in to see him, or not?”

“You go first,” she said.

He had a powerful electric torch with him; he had a loaded revolver. But still he was afraid. His fear of seeing Patrell was monstrous, intolerable. He thought that if he were to see

Patrell lying on the floor in there, his wildly beating heart would stop short.... If Patrell was lying there in the dark, with his eyes wide open....

The door was opened a crack; he slid it back. He let the light of his torch play over the cavernous blackness. He saw nothing there. Nothing. He entered, stood waiting a moment, and presently Blanche followed him. He turned the torch upon her. It seemed to him that her dark eyes were glaring at him. He was afraid of her. He could not shoot her if she looked at him.

He set the torch down on the floor, and it threw a circle of bright light upward to the high ceiling. He must make her turn her back.

“We’ll have to go up that ladder ...” he said. “There at the back....”

But she did not turn to look where he pointed. She kept on looking at him. Staring at him, with enormous black eyes in a white face. It was as if she read something in his face, and an atrocious knowledge were dawning upon her.... It would have to be done now.... She would have to stop—staring at him....

“Well ...!” he said. He tried to speak in a reassuring, matter-of-fact tone; he tried to smile. And at the sight of his smile she screamed.

“Charles!”

He reached in his pocket for the revolver, staring at her as she stared at him. And he heard footsteps overhead.

He believed that her cry had raised Patrell from the dead. He believed that Patrell would come down that ladder. He

felt such terror that he could not think. The footsteps ceased. He saw, dimly, a foot on the top rung of the ladder.

The girl did not see it. She could not take her eyes from his face. But he saw. Someone was coming down, backward; a man.... Descending in silence—slowly and shakily. A dead man. A corpse, with a bandage about his dark hair.... When he reached the foot of the ladder, he would turn, and Branscombe would see that awful face....

He had reached the floor, and he did turn. And once again Branscombe faced Patrell.

CHAPTER XXVI

“Blanche ...” said Patrell gently.

The girl turned, and tried to run to him. He came to her and put his arms about her.

“Steady, now, that’s a good kid,” he said.

The sound of his voice had broken the spell. He was no dead man.

“I never killed him,” thought Branscombe. “All this has been—for nothing.”

And now he was trapped. Now he was finished. He was here, in this lonely place with Patrell and with Blanche. In a few moments Jerry would come. The three people he had tried to destroy.... There was no escape.

Patrell’s handsome face was bruised and scarred, but he was quite well enough....

“Anything to say in your defence?” he asked. “Before I rub you out?”

Branscombe was silent.

“I’m going to kill you—with my hands,” said Patrell.

“I’m armed ...” said Branscombe, in a queer, muffled voice.

“That doesn’t matter. You can’t hurt me. Anything to say—while you have the chance?”

He must find something to say, while he had the chance. “I admit that—I lost my temper ...” he said. “I knocked you down—”

“You cur!” said Patrell. “ ‘Lost your temper!’ God! You were like a wild beast. You tried to kill, in just the way a cur

would. When you got me down you went mad. You kicked me....”

“Charles ...!” said Blanche.

“Don’t say anything, poor kid. This is my turn. You tried to kill me. But you never even troubled to see if I was dead. You didn’t care as long as I was out of the way. As soon as Jerry got me in here he knew I wasn’t dead. God knows he’s rotten enough—but he’s a hero compared with you. He brought me some water. I’ll never forget that. He brought me some water when I’d have died without it. Then he told me that you were paying him twenty-five dollars to dispose of me.... I told him he could do better than that.... We were going to get plenty of money out of you, Branscombe, before I finished.... Jerry’s been bringing me food and whisky and smokes; he’s been looking after me.”

“Yes,” said Branscombe. “I knew all that.”

For in his extremity, inspiration had come to him once more.

“You damned liar!” said Patrell. “You thought I was dead. And you paid Jerry to kill this poor girl—”

“Charles! Was it him?”

He patted her shoulder and went on.

“Jerry was very fastidious. He didn’t know who she was. Not until she called my name. When he knew she was my girl, he let her go, and he apologised to me very civilly.... I sent him back to you, Branscombe. He told me your new plans—that he was to kill her here, to-night, and be well paid for it. I didn’t expect the pleasure of seeing you here. I planned to meet you—later—when you’d handed out the money to Jerry.”

The last chance....

“You’re rather gullible,” said Branscombe. His brain was working well, but he could not steady his voice. He took out a cigarette and lit it with a shaking hand. “I’ve been surprised, all along, by your remarkable confidence in Jerry.”

He inhaled deeply. He had only a few moments, so very few before Jerry came....

“I was panic-stricken, after I’d attacked you,” he went on, and his voice was growing steadier and steadier. “I knew I hadn’t killed you. I’m not a fool. I knew you’d recover and make trouble for me. For a man in my position, a scandal like this would be disastrous. I didn’t pay him to dispose of you. I paid him to look after you, and try to persuade you to accept a cash settlement from me. Apparently he’s been lying to you with more intelligence than I’d have expected of him.”

“No use, Branscombe,” said Patrell.

But there was a slight, almost imperceptible change in his tone that Branscombe, in his extremity, could notice.

“As for my paying him to kill this girl,” he went on, “that’s amazing. You might see for yourself that, apart from the senselessness of it, I’m not the sort of man for such melodrama. I went to your lodging. I posed as a friend of yours. I paid the girl’s bill, and took her to a decent hotel. I told Jerry to let you know what I’d done. I’ll admit that I did it in the hope of placating you. Because I wanted to avoid trouble. But she’ll tell you herself that I did all I could to make her comfortable.”

“Did he, Blanche?”

“Well, yes ...” she admitted. “Only—he didn’t like me.... And Jerry....”

“I don’t know what Jerry’s game was,” said Branscombe. “But probably he thought I’d given the girl money, and he meant to rob her. I’m not in any way responsible for his attack upon her. When I found her at Hil—at your wife’s house, I was shocked. I took her to my own house. I did what I could for her. And I promised her I’d bring her to see you this evening. I’ve done so.”

“Did he promise you that, Blanche?”

“Well, yes.... He did,” she said. “But he was looking at me in such a queer kind of way—”

“I was very reluctant to see you, Patrell. Naturally.... But I told Jerry to ask if you’d accept five thousand in cash to let the matter drop. He assured me that you had agreed, and that you’d be expecting me. I’m here—with the money.”

There was a silence. Jerry might come at any moment....

“It’s obvious that Jerry’s been double-crossing us both,” he said. “I don’t suppose he’s brought you any of the small sums of money I sent to you—fifty dollars once—”

“No,” said Patrell, and straightened his slim shoulders. “I meant to make you pay.... But I don’t now. I suppose you’re telling the truth. I don’t think you’d have the nerve or the brains to invent such a good lie. I suppose it’s true that Jerry’s been double-crossing me.... And that you’ve come here to-night with five thousand dollars to shut me up. Give it to me!”

“You’ll let the matter drop?”

“I’ll let the matter drop on condition that I never have to set eyes upon you again. Give me the money!”

Branscombe took out the neat packet of bills held together by an elastic band, and handed it to Patrell. But even now he wasn't sure.... It was almost too much of a miracle that Patrell should believe him. That now, in the very last moment, he should escape.

Patrell threw the packet in his face.

“Now get out!” he said. “While I'm able to keep my hands off you—”

A miracle. He stepped out into the cool summer night. He was free.... He walked toward his car, and he began to cry.... He was half-blinded with tears as he took the wheel. Another car was coming. That would be Jerry.

“I've got to get away damned quick,” he thought.

Go home ...? Now that Patrell was in the world again, Hilda would learn the truth.... Perhaps Jerry would be able to convince Patrell that it was Branscombe who lied, not he.... And Eva would surely hear something to make her suspicious....

“Colton ...!” he thought. “Oh, God! What am I going to tell Colton ...?”

He told himself that he could manage. He had managed before. He would think of plausible explanations for all these people.... For Hilda, for Colton, for Eva.... He would somehow get rid of Jerry.... He would have to explain—and explain—and explain.... Lie and lie....

He could not. Something had happened to him. He started the car and drove straight ahead. God knew where the lane led to.... He could not explain—so much to so many people.... He was hemmed in by enemies—by people determined to humiliate and disgrace him.... He was not the

strong and subtle man of the Renaissance days. He was crying.... He was most horribly and desolately alone. Eva loved that Evans fellow.... There was no one for him, and there never would be.

He saw himself. He saw the boy who had been ignored and despised in school because he had been a prig and a coward. He saw himself as he was now, a man of thirty who had been afraid to live, who had tried to shut himself away from the world. He looked haughty and distinguished, and he was so pitiably undistinguished, so abject.... Patrell would tell what had happened....

“He knocked me down and battered me while I was helpless. He kicked me....”

It was too much. He stopped the car and took out his revolver. His hand was shaking violently, and he held the muzzle to his temple.

Jerry found him. He heard the shot and drove up the lane, and discovered what was left of Andrew Branscombe. He was very much afraid of being blamed for this, so he drove away in haste. No one else had heard the shot. There was a violent thunderstorm in the night, but it didn't disturb Branscombe.

Eva notified the police when he failed to come home, and they discovered him. It was a good thing for him that he never heard what was said about him.

THE END

**Typographical errors corrected by the etext
transcriber:**

He did not want to talk to talk=> He did not want to
talk {pg 25}
do a job or me=> do a job for me {pg 82}

[The end of *The Unfinished Crime* by Elisabeth Sanxay
Holding]