

Lynch Lawrence L.

The Last Stroke: A Detective Story



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CHAPTER I

SOMETHING WRONG

It was a May morning in Glenville. Pretty, picturesque Glenville, low lying by the lake shore, with the waters of the lake surging to meet it, or coyly receding from it, on the one side, and the green-clad hills rising gradually and gently on the other, ending in a belt of trees at the very horizon's edge.

There is little movement in the quiet streets of the town at half-past eight o'clock in the morning, save for the youngsters who, walking, running, leaping, sauntering or waiting idly, one for another, are, or should be, on their way to the school-house which stands upon the very southernmost outskirts of the town, and a little way up the hilly slope, at a reasonably safe remove from the willow-fringed lake shore.

The Glenville school-house was one of the earliest public buildings erected in the village, and it had been "located" in what was confidently expected to be the centre of the place. But the new and late-coming impetus, which had changed the hamlet of half a hundred dwellings to one of twenty times that number, and made of it a quiet and not too fashionable little summer resort, had carried the business of the place northward, and its residences still farther north, thus leaving this seat of learning aloof from, and quite above the newer town, in isolated and lofty dignity, surrounded by trees; in the outskirts, in fact, of a second belt of wood, which girdled the lake shore, even as the further and loftier fringe of timber outlined the hilltops at the edge of the eastern horizon and far away.

"Les call 'er the 'cademy?" suggested Elias Robbins, one of the builders of the school-house, and an early settler of Glenville. "What's to hinder?"

"Nothin'," declared John Rote, the village oracle. "'Twill sound first-rate."

They were standing outside the building, just completed and resplendent in two coats of yellow paint, and they were just from the labour of putting in, "hangin'" the new bell.

All of masculine Glenville was present, and the other sex was not without representation.

"Suits me down ter the ground!" commented a third citizen; and no doubt it would have suited the majority, but when Parson Ryder was consulted, he smiled genially and shook his head.

"It won't do, I'm afraid, Elias," he said. "We're only a village as yet, you see, and we can't even dub it the High School, except from a geographical point of view. However, we are bound to grow, and our titles will come with the growth."

The growth, after a time, began; but it was only a summer growth; and the school-house was still a village school-house with its master and one under, or primary, teacher; and to-day there was a frisking group of the smaller youngsters rushing about the school-yard, while the first bell rang out, and half a dozen of the older pupils clustered about the girlish under-teacher full of questions and wonder; for Johnny Robbins, whose turn it was to ring the bell this week, after watching the clock, and the path up the hill, alternately, until the time for the first bell had come, and was actually twenty seconds past, had reluctantly but firmly seized the rope and began to pull.

"'Taint no use, Miss Grant; I'll have to do it. He told me not to wait for nothin', never, when 'twas half-past eight, and so" – cling, clang, cling – "I'm bound" – cling – "ter do it!" Clang. "You see" – cling – "even if he aint here – " Clang, clang, clang.

The boy pulled lustily at the rope for about half as long as usual, and then he stopped.

"You don't s'pose that clock c'ud be wrong, do yo', Miss Grant? Mr. Brierly's never been later'n quarter past before."

Miss Grant turned her wistful and somewhat anxious eyes toward the eastern horizon, and rested a hand upon the shoulder of a tall girl at her side.

"He may be ill, Johnny," she said, reluctantly, "or his watch may be wrong. He's sure to come in time for morning song service. Come, Meta, let us go in and look at those fractions."

Five – ten – fifteen minutes passed and the two heads bent still over book and slate. Twenty minutes, and Johnny's head appeared at the door, half a dozen others behind it.

"Has he come, Johnny?"

"No'm; sha'n't I go an' see – "

But Miss Grant arose, stopping him with a gesture. "He would laugh at us, Johnny." Then, with another look at the anxious faces, "wait until nine o'clock, at least."

Johnny and his followers went sullenly back to the porch, and Meta's lip began to quiver.

"Somethin's happened to him, Miss Grant," she whimpered; "I know somethin' has happened!"

"Nonsense," said Miss Grant. But she went to the window and called to a little girl at play upon the green.

"Nellie Fry! Come here, dear."

Nellie Fry, an a, b, c student, came running in, her yellow locks flying straight out behind her.

"What is it, Miss Grant?"

"Nellie, did you see Mr. Brierly at breakfast?"

"Yes'm!"

"And – quite well?"

"Why – I guess so. He talked just like he does always, and asked the blessin'. He – he ate a lot, too – for him. I 'member ma speakin' of it."

"You remember, Nellie."

Miss Grant kissed the child and walked to her desk, bending over her roll call, and seeming busy over it until the clock upon the opposite wall struck the hour of nine, and Johnny's face appeared at the door, simultaneously with the last stroke.

"Sh'll I ring, Miss Grant?"

"Yes." The girl spoke with sudden decision. "Ring the bell, and then go at once to Mrs. Fry's house, and ask if anything has happened to detain Mr. Brierly. Don't loiter, Johnny."

There was an unwonted flush now upon the girl's usually pale cheeks, and sudden energy in her step and voice.

The school building contained but two rooms, beside the large hall, and the cloak rooms upon either side; and as the scholars trooped in, taking their respective places with more than their usual readiness, but with unusual bustle and exchange of whispers and inquiring looks, the slender girl went once more to the entrance and looked up and down the path from the village.

There was no one in sight, and she turned and put her hand upon the swaying bell-rope.

"Stop it, Johnny! There's surely something wrong! Go, now, and ask after Mr. Brierly. He must be ill!"

"He'd 'a sent word, sure," said the boy, with conviction, as he snatched his hat from its nail. But Miss Grant only waved him away and entered the south room, where the elder pupils were now, for the most part, assembled.

"Girls and boys," she said, the colour still burning in her cheeks, "something has delayed Mr. Brierly. I hope it will be for a short time only. In the meantime, until we know – know what to expect, you will, of course, keep your places and take up your studies. I am sure I can trust you to be as quiet and studious as if your teacher was here; and while we wait, and I begin my lessons, I shall set no monitor over you. I am sure you will not need one."

The pupils of Charles Brierly were ruled by gentleness and love, and they were loyal to so mild a ruler. With low whispers and words of acquiescence, they took up their books, and Miss Grant went back to her more restless small people, leaving the connecting door between the north and south rooms open.

Mrs. Fry's cottage was in the heart of the village, and upon the hillside, but Johnny stayed for nothing, running hither, hat in hand, and returning panting, and with a troubled face.

"Miss Grant," he panted, bursting into her presence with scant ceremony, "he aint there! Mrs. Fry says he came to school before eight o'clock. He went out while she was combin' Nellie's hair, an' she aint seen him since!"

Hilda Grant walked slowly down from her little platform, and advanced, with a waving movement, until she stood in the doorway between the two rooms. The colour had all faded from her face, and she put a hand against the door-pane as if to steady herself, and seemed to control or compose herself with an effort.

"Boys – children – have any of you seen Mr. Brierly this morning?"

For a moment there was an utter silence in the school-room. Then, slowly, and with a sheepish shuffling movement, a stolid-faced boy made his way out from one of the side seats in Miss Grant's room, and came toward her without speaking. He was meanly dressed in garments ill-matched and worse fitting; his arms were abnormally long, his shoulders rounded and stooping, and his eyes were at once dull and furtive. He was the largest pupil, and the dullest, in Miss Grant's charge, and as he came toward her, still silent, but with his mouth half open, some of the little ones tittered audibly.

"Silence!" said the teacher, sternly. "Peter, come here." Her tone grew suddenly gentle. "Have you seen Mr. Brierly this morning?"

"Uh hum!" The boy stopped short and hung his head.

"That's good news, Peter. Tell me where you saw him."

"Down there," nodding toward the lake.

"At the – lake?"

"Yep!"

"How long ago, Peter?"

"Fore school – hour, maybe."

"How far away, Peter?"

"Big ways. Most by Injun Hill."

"Ah! and what was he doing?"

"Set on ground – lookin'."

"Miss Grant!" broke in the boy Johnny. "He was goin' to shoot at a mark; I guess he's got a new target down there, an' him an' some of the boys shoots there, you know. Gracious!" his eyes suddenly widening, "Dy'u s'pose he's got hurt, anyway?"

Miss Grant turned quickly toward the simpleton.

"Peter, you are sure it was this morning that you saw Mr. Brierly?"

"Uh hum."

"And, was he alone?"

"Uh hum."

"Who else did you see down there, Peter?"

The boy lifted his arm, shielding his eyes with it as if expecting a blow.

"I bet some one's tried ter hit him!" commented Johnny.

"Hush, Johnny! Peter, what is it? Did some one frighten you?"

The boy wagged his head.

"Who was it?"

"N – Nothin' – " Peter began to whimper.

"You must answer me, Peter; was any one else by the lake? Whom else did you see?"

"A – a – ghost!" blubbered the boy, and this was all she could gain from him.

And now the children began to whisper, and some of the elder to suggest possibilities.

"Maybe he's met a tramp."

"P'r'aps he's sprained his ankle!"

"P'r'aps he's falled into the lake, teacher," piped a six-year-old.

"Poh!" retorted a small boy. "He kin swim like – anything."

"Children, be silent!" A look of annoyance had suddenly relaxed the strained, set look of the under teacher's white face as she recalled, at the moment, how she had heard Mr. Samuel Doran – president of the board of school directors – ask Mr. Brierly to drop in at his office that morning to look at some specimen school books. That was the evening before, and, doubtless, he was there now.

Miss Grant bit her lip, vexed at her folly and fright. But after a moment's reflection she turned again to Johnny Robbins, saying:

"Johnny, will you go back as far as Mr. Doran's house? Go to the office door, and if Mr. Brierly is there, as I think he will be, ask him if he would like me to hear his classes until he is at liberty."

Again the ready messenger caught up his flapping straw hat, while a little flutter of relief ran through the school, and Miss Grant went back to her desk, the look of vexation still upon her face.

Five minutes' brisk trotting brought the boy to Mr. Doran's door, which was much nearer than the Fry homestead, and less than five minutes found him again at the school-house door.

"Miss Grant," he cried, excitedly, "he wa'n't there, nor haint been; an' Mr. Doran's startin' right out, with two or three other men, to hunt him. He says there's somethin' wrong about it."

CHAPTER II

FOUND

"I suppose it's all right," said Samuel Doran, as he walked toward the school-house, followed by three or four of the villagers, "called" because of their nearness, rather than "chosen"; "but Brierly's certainly the last man to let any ordinary matter keep him from his post. We'll hear what Miss Grant has to say."

Miss Grant met the group at the gate, and when she had told them all she had to tell, ending with the testimony of the boy Peter, and the suggestion concerning the target-shooting.

"Sho!" broke in one of the men, as she was about to express her personal opinion and her fears, "that's the top an' bottom of the hull business! Brierly's regularly took with ashootin' at a mark. I've been out with him two or three evenin's of late. He's just got int'rusted, and forgot ter look at his watch. We'll find him safe enough som'e'eres along the bank; let's cut across the woods."

"He must have heard the bell," objected Mr. Doran, "but, of course, if Peter Kramer saw him down there, that's our way. Don't be anxious, Miss Grant; probably Hopkins is right."

The road which they followed for some distance ran a somewhat devious course through the wood, which one entered very soon after leaving the school-house. It ran along the hillside, near its base, but still somewhat above the stretch of ground, fully a hundred yards in width, between it and the lake shore.

Above the road, to eastward, the wooded growth climbed the gentle upward slope, growing, as it seemed, more and more dense and shadowy as it mounted. But between the road and the river the trees grew less densely, with numerous sunny openings, but with much undergrowth, here and there, of hazel and sumach, wild vines, and along the border of the lake the low overhanging scrub willow.

For more than a fourth of a mile the four men followed the road, walking in couples, and not far apart, and contenting themselves with an occasional "hallo, Brierly," and with peering into the openings through which they could see the lake shore as they passed along.

A little further on, however, a bit of rising ground cut off all sight of the lake for a short distance. It was an oblong mound, so shapely, so evenly proportioned that it had become known as the Indian Mound, and was believed to have been the work of the aborigines, a prehistoric fortification, or burial place.

As they came opposite this mound, the man Hopkins stopped, saying:

"Hadn't a couple of us fellers better go round the mound on t'other side? Course, if he's on the bank, an' all right, he'd ort to hear us – but –"

"Yes," broke in the leader, who had been silent and very grave for some moments. "Go that way, Hopkins, and we'll keep to the road and meet you at the further end of the mound."

They separated silently, and for some moments Mr. Doran and his companions walked on, still silent, then —

"We ought to have brought that simpleton along," Doran said, as if meditating. "The Kramers live only a quarter of a mile beyond the mound, and it must have been near here – Stop!"

He drew his companions back from the track, as a pony's head appeared around a curve of the road; and then, as a black shetland and low phaeton came in sight, he stepped forward again, and took off his hat.

He was squarely in the middle of the road, and the lady in the little phaeton pulled up her pony and met his gaze with a look of mute inquiry. She was a small, fair woman, with pale, regular features and large blue eyes. She was dressed in mourning, and, beyond a doubt, was not a native of Glenville.

"Excuse my haste, ma'am," said Doran, coming to the side of the phaeton. "I'm James Doran, owner of the stable where this horse belongs, and we are out in search of our schoolmaster. Have you seen a tall young man along this road anywhere?"

The lady was silent a moment, then – "Was he a fair young man?" she asked, slowly.

"Yes, tall and fair."

The lady gathered up her reins.

"I passed such a person," she said, "when I drove out of town shortly after breakfast. He was going south, as I was. It must have been somewhere not far from this place."

"And – did you see his face?"

"No; the pony was fresh then, and I was intent upon him."

She lifted the reins, and then turned as if to speak again when the man who had been a silent witness of the little dialogue came a step nearer.

"I s'pose you hav'n't heard any noise – a pistol shot – nor anythin' like that, have ye, ma'am?"

"Mercy! No, indeed! Why, what has happened?"

Before either could answer, there came a shout from the direction of the lake shore.

"Doran, come – quick!"

They were directly opposite the mound, at its central or highest point, and, turning swiftly, James Doran saw the man Hopkins at the top of it, waving his arms frantically.

"Is he found?" called Doran, moving toward him.

"Yes. He's hurt!"

With the words Hopkins disappeared behind the knoll, but Doran was near enough to see that the man's face was scared and pale. He turned and called sharply to the lady, who had taken up her whip and was driving on.

"Madam, stop! There's a man hurt. Wait there a moment; we may need your horse." The last words were uttered as he ran up the mound, his companions close at his heels. And the lady checked the willing pony once more with a look half reluctant, wholly troubled.

"What a position," she said to herself, impatiently. "These villagers are not diffident, upon my word."

A few moments only had passed when approaching footsteps and the sound of quick panting breaths caused her to turn her head, and she saw James Doran running swiftly toward her, pale faced, and too full of anxiety to be observant of the courtesies.

"You must let me drive back to town with you, madam," he panted, springing into the little vehicle with a force that tried its springs and wrought havoc with the voluminous folds of the lady's gown. "We must have the doctor, and – the coroner, too, I fear – at once!"

He put out his hand for the reins, but she anticipated the movement and struck the pony a sharp and sudden blow that sent him galloping townward at the top of his speed, the reins still in her two small, perfectly-gloved hands.

For a few moments no word was spoken; then, without turning her eyes from the road, she asked:

"What is it?"

"Death, I'm afraid!"

"What! Not suicide?"

"Never. An accident, of course."

"How horrible!" The small hands tightened their grasp upon the reins, and no other word was spoken until they were passing the school-house, when she asked —

"Who was it?"

"Charles Brierly, our head teacher, and a good man."

Miss Grant was standing at one of the front windows and she leaned anxiously out as the little trap darted past.

"We can't stop," said Doran, as much to himself as to his companion. "I must have the pony, ma'am. Where can I leave you?"

"Anywhere here. Is there anything – any message I can deliver? I am a stranger, but I understand the need of haste. Ought not those pupils to be sent home?"

He put his hand upon the reins. "Stop him," he said. "You are quick to think, madam. Will you take a message to the school-house – to Miss Grant?"

"Surely."

They had passed the school-house and as the pony stopped, Doran sprang out and offered his hand, which she scarcely touched in alighting.

"What shall I say?" she asked as she sprang down.

"See Miss Grant. Tell her privately that Mr. Brierly has met with an accident, and that the children must be sent home quietly and at once. At once, mind."

"I understand." She turned away with a quick, nervous movement, but he stopped her.

"One moment. Your name, please? Your evidence may be wanted."

"By whom?"

"By the coroner; to corroborate our story."

"I see. I am Mrs. Jamieson; at the Glenville House."

She turned from him with the last word, and walked swiftly back toward the school-house.

Hilda Grant was still at the window. She had made no attempt to listen to recitations, or even to call the roll; and she hastened out, at sight of the slight black robed figure entering the school yard, her big grey eyes full of the question her lips refused to frame.

They met at the foot of the steps, and Mrs. Jamieson spoke at once, as if in reply, to the wordless inquiry in the other's face.

"I am Mrs. Jamieson," she said, speaking low, mindful of the curious faces peering out from two windows, on either side of the open door. "I was stopped by Mr. –"

"Mr. Doran?"

"Yes. He wished me to tell you that the teacher, Mr. –"

"Brierly?"

"Yes; that he has met with an accident; and that you had better close the school, and send the children home quietly, and at once."

"Oh!" Suddenly the woman's small figure swayed; she threw out a hand as if for support and, before the half-dazed girl before her could reach her, she sank weakly upon the lowest step. "Oh!" she sighed again. "I did not realise – I – I believe I am frightened!" And then, as Miss Grant bent over her, she added weakly: "Don't mind me. I – I'll rest here a moment. Send away your pupils; I only need rest."

When the wondering children had passed out from the school-rooms, and were scattering, in slow-moving, eagerly-talking groups, Hilda Grant stood for a moment beside her desk, rigid and with all the anguish of her soul revealed, in this instant of solitude, upon her face.

"He is dead!" she murmured. "I know it, I feel it! He is dead." Her voice, even to herself, sounded hard and strange. She lifted a cold hand to her eyes, but there were no tears there; and then suddenly she remembered her guest.

A moment later, Mrs. Jamieson, walking weakly up the steps, met her coming from the school-room with a glass of water in her hand, which she proffered silently.

The stranger drank it eagerly. "Thank you," she said. "It is what I need. May I come inside for a little?"

Hilda led the way in silence, and, when her visitor was seated, came and sat down opposite her. "Will you tell me what you can?" she asked hesitatingly.

"Willingly. Only it is so little. I have been for some time a guest at the Glenville House, seeking to recover here in your pure air and country quiet, from the effects of sorrow and a long illness. I have driven about these hills and along the lake shore almost daily."

"I have seen you," said Hilda, "as you drove past more than once."

"And did you see me this morning?"

"No."

"Still, I passed this spot at eight o'clock; I think, perhaps, earlier. My physician has cautioned me against long drives, and this morning I did not go quite so far as usual, because yesterday I went too far. I had turned my pony toward home just beyond that pretty mill where the little streams join the lake, and was driving slowly homeward when this Mr. Doran – is not that right? – this Mr. Doran stopped me to ask if I had seen a man, a tall, fair man – "

"And had you?"

"I told him yes; and in a moment some one appeared at the top of the Indian Mound, and called out that the man was found."

"How – tell me how?"

Mrs. Jamieson drew back a little and looked into the girl's face with strange intentness.

"I – I fear he was a friend of yours," she said in a strangely hesitating manner, her eyes swiftly scanning the pale face.

"You fear! Why do you fear? Tell me. You say he is injured. Tell me all – the worst!"

Still the small, erect, black-clad figure drew back, a look of sudden understanding and apprehension dawning in her face. She moved her lips, but no sound came from them.

"Tell me!" cried the girl again. "In mercy – oh, don't you understand?"

"Yes, I understand now." The lady drew weakly back in the seat and seemed to be compelling her own eyes and lips to steadiness.

"Listen! We must be calm – both of us. I – I am not strong; I dare not give way. Yes, yes; this is all I can tell you. The man, Mr. Doran, asked me to wait in the road with the pony. He came back soon, and said that we must find the doctor and the coroner at once; there had been an accident, and the man – the one for whom they searched – was dead, he feared."

She sprang suddenly to her feet.

"You must not faint. If you do, I – I cannot help you; I am not strong enough."

"I shall not faint," replied Hilda Grant, in a hard strange voice, and she, too, arose quickly, and went with straight swift steps through the open door between the two rooms and out of sight.

Mrs. Jamieson stood looking after her for a moment, as if in doubt and wonder; then she put up an unsteady hand and drew down the gauze veil folded back from her close-fitting mourning bonnet.

"How strange!" she whispered. "She turns from me as if – and yet I had to tell her! Ugh! I cannot stay here alone. I shall break down, too, and I must not. I must not. Here, and alone!"

A moment she stood irresolute, then walking slowly she went out of the school-room, down the stone steps, and through the gate, townward, slowly at first, and then her pace increasing, and a look of apprehension growing in her eyes.

"Oh," she murmured as she hurried on, "what a horrible morning!" And then she started hysterically as the shriek of the incoming fast mail train struck her ears. "Oh, how nervous this has made me," she murmured, and drew a sigh of relief as she paused unsteadily at the door of her hotel.

For fully fifteen minutes after Hilda Grant had reached the empty solitude of her own school-room she stood crouched against the near wall, her hands clenched and hanging straight at her side, her eyes fixed on space. Then, with eyes still tearless, but with dry sobs breaking from her throat, she tottered to her seat before the desk, and let her face fall forward upon her arms, moaning from time to time like some hurt animal, and so heedless of all about her that she did not hear a light

step in the hall without, nor the approach of the man who paused in the doorway to gaze at her in troubled surprise.

He was a tall and slender young fellow, with a handsome face, an eye clear, frank, and keen, and a mouth which, but for the moustache which shadowed it, might have been pronounced too strong for beauty.

A moment he stood looking with growing pity upon the grieving woman, and then he turned and silently tip-toed across the room and to the outer door. Standing there he seemed to ponder, and then, softly stepping back to the vacant platform, he seated himself in the teacher's chair and idly opened the first of the volumes scattered over the desk, smiling as he read the name, Charles Brierly, written across the fly-leaf.

"Poor old Charley," he said to himself, as he closed the book. "I wonder how he enjoys his pedagogic venture, the absurd fellow," and then by some strange instinct he lifted his eyes to the clock on the opposite wall, and the strangeness of the situation seemed to strike him with sudden force and brought him to his feet.

What did it mean! This silent school-room! These empty desks and scattered books! Where were the pupils? the teacher? And why was that brown-tressed head with its hidden face bowed down in that other room, in an agony of sorrow?

Half a dozen quick strides brought him again to the door of communication, and this time his strong, firm footsteps were heard, and the bowed head lifted itself wearily, and the eyes of the two met, each questioning the other.

"I beg your pardon," spoke a rich, strong voice. "May I ask where I shall find Mr. Brierly?"

Slowly, as if fascinated, the girl came toward him, a look almost of terror in her face.

"Who are you?" she faltered.

"I am Robert Brierly. I had hoped to find my brother here at his post. Will you tell me – "

But the sudden cry from her lips checked him, and the pent-up tears burst forth as Hilda Grant, her heart wrung with pity, flung herself down upon the low platform, and sitting there with her face bent upon her sleeves, sobbed out her own sorrow in her heartbreak of sympathy for the grief that must soon overwhelm him and strike the happy light from his face.

Sobs choked her utterance, and the young man stood near her, uncertain, anxious, and troubled, until from the direction of the town the sound of flying wheels smote their ears, and Hilda sprang to her feet with a sharp cry.

"I must tell you; you must bear it as well as I. Hark! they are going to him; you must go too!" She turned toward the window, swayed heavily, and was caught in his arms.

It was a brief swoon, but when she opened her eyes and looked about her, the sound of the flying wheels was dying away in the distance, southward.

He had found the pail of pure spring water, and applied some of it to her hands and temples with the quickness and ease of a woman, and he now held a glass to her lips.

She drank feverishly, put a hand before her eyes, raised herself with an effort, and seemed to struggle mutely for self-control. Then she turned toward him.

"I am Hilda Grant," she said, brokenly.

"My brother's friend! My sister that is to be!"

"No, no; not now. Something has happened. You should have gone with those men – with the doctor. They are going to bring him back."

"Miss Grant, sister!" His hands had closed firmly upon her wrists, and his voice was firm. "You must tell me the worst, quick. Don't seek to spare me; think of him! What is it?"

"He – he went from home early, with his pistol, they say, to shoot at a target. He is dead!"

"Dead! Charley dead! Quick! Where is he? I must see, I must. Oh! there must be some horrible mistake."

He sprang toward the door, but she was before him.

"Go this way. Here is his wheel. Take it. Go south – the lake shore – the Indian Mound."

A moment later a young man with pallid face, set mouth and tragic eyes was flying toward the Indian Mound upon a swift wheel, and in the school-room, prone upon the floor, a girl lay in a death-like swoon.

CHAPTER III

NEMESIS

"Mr. Brierly, are you strong enough to bear a second shock? I must confer with you before – before we remove the body."

It was Doctor Barnes who thus addressed Robert Brierly, who, after the first sight of the outstretched figure upon the lake shore, and the first shock of horror and anguish, had turned away from the group hovering about the doctor, as he knelt beside the dead, to face his grief alone.

Doctor Barnes, besides being a skilled physician, possessed three other qualities necessary to a successful career in medicine – he was prompt to act, practical and humane.

Robert Brierly was leaning against a tall tree, his back toward that group by the water's edge, and his face pressed against the tree's rugged trunk. He lifted his head as the doctor spoke, and turned a white, set face toward him. The look in his dark eyes was assurance sufficient that he was ready to listen and still able to manfully endure another blow.

The two men moved a few steps away, and then the doctor said:

"I must be brief. You know, do you not, the theory, that of these men, as to the cause of this calamity?"

"It was an accident, of course."

"They make it that, or suicide."

"Never! Impossible! My brother was a God-fearing man, a happy man."

"Still, there is a bullet-hole just where self-inflicted wounds are oftenest made."

Brierly groaned aloud. "Still," he persisted, "I will never believe it."

"You need not." Doctor Barnes sank his voice to a yet lower pitch. "Mr. Brierly, there is a second bullet-wound in the back!"

"The back! And that means – "

"It means murder, without a doubt. No huntsman could so mistake his mark in this open woodland, along the lake. Besides, hunting is not allowed so near the village. Wait," as the young man was about to speak, "we have no time to discuss motives now, or the possible assassin. What I wish to know is, do you want this fact known now – at once?"

"I – I fear I don't understand. Would you have my brother's name – "

"Stop, man! Knowing that these men have already jumped at a theory, the thought occurred to me that the work of the officers might be made easier if we let the theory of accident stand."

He broke off, looking keenly at the other. He was a good judge of faces, and in that of Robert Brierly he had not been deceived.

The young man's form grew suddenly erect and tense, his eye keen and resolute.

"You are right!" he said, with sudden energy, as he caught at the other's hand. "They must not be enlightened yet."

"Then, the sooner we are back where we can guard this secret, the safer it will be. Come. This is hard for you, Mr. Brierly, I know, and I could say much. But words, no matter how sincerely sympathetic, cannot lighten such a blow as this. I admire your strength, your fortitude, under such a shock. Will you let me add that any service I can render as physician, as man, or as friend, is yours for the asking?"

The doctor hesitated a moment, then held out his hand, and the four watchers beside the body exchanged quick glances of surprise upon seeing the two men grasp hands, silently and with solemn faces, and then turn, still silently, back to the place where the body lay.

"Don't touch that pistol, Doran," the doctor spoke, in his capacity of coroner.

"Certainly not, Doc. I wanted to feel, if I could, whether those side chambers had been discharged or not. You see," he added, rising to his feet, "when we saw this, we knew what we had to do, and it has been 'hands off.' We've only used our eyes so far forth."

"And that I wish to do now with more calmness," said Robert Brierly, coming close to the body and kneeling beside it.

It lay less than six feet from the very water's edge, the body of a tall, slender young man, with a delicate, high-bred face that had been fair when living, and was now marble-white, save for the blood-stains upon the right temple, where the bullet had entered. The hair, of that soft blonde colour, seen oftenest upon the heads of children, and rarely upon adults, was thick and fine, and long enough to frame the handsome face in close half rings that no barber's skill could ever subdue or make straight. The hands were long, slender, and soft as a woman's; the feet small and arched, and the form beneath the loose outlines of the blue flannel fatigue suit in which it was clad, while slender and full of grace, was well built and not lacking in muscle.

It lay as it had fallen, upon its side, and with one arm thrown out and one limb, the left, drawn up. Not far from the outstretched right arm and hand lay the pistol, a six-shooter, which the brother at once recognised, with two of the six chambers empty, a fact which Mr. Doran had just discovered, and was now holding in reserve.

The doctor, upon his discovery of the second bullet-wound, had at once flung his own handkerchief over the prostrate head, and called for the carriage robe from his own phaeton, which, fortunately for the wind and legs of the black pony, had stood ready at his office door, and was now in waiting, the horse tethered to a tree at the edge of the wood not far away.

This lap robe Robert Brierly reverently drew away as he knelt beside the still form, and thus, for some moments remained, turning his gaze from right to left, from the great tree which grew close at the motionless feet, and between the group and the water's edge, its branches spreading out above them and forming a canopy over the body to a dead stump some distance away, where a small target leaned, its rings of white and black and red showing how often a steady hand had sent the ball, close and closer, until the bull's eye was pierced at last.

No word was uttered as he knelt there, and before he arose he placed a hand upon the dead man's shoulder with an impulsive caressing motion, and bending down, kissed the cold temple just above the crimson death-mark. Then, slowly, reverently, he drew the covering once more over the body and arose.

"That was a vow," he said to the doctor, who stood close beside him. "Where is – ah!" He turned toward the group of men who, when he knelt, had withdrawn to a respectful distance.

"Which of you suggested that he had fallen – tripped?"

Doran came forward and silently pointed to the foot of the tree, where, trailing across the grass, and past the dead man's feet, was a tendril of wild ivy entangled and broken.

"Oh!" exclaimed Brierly. "You saw that too?"

"It was the first thing I did see," said the other, coming to his side, "when I looked about me. It's a very clear case, Mr. Brierly. Target-shooting has been quite a pastime here lately. And see! There couldn't be a better place to stand and shoot at that target, than right against that tree, braced against it. It's the right distance and all. He must have stood there, and when he hit the bull's eye, he made a quick forward step, caught his foot in that vine and tripped. A man will naturally throw out his arm in falling so, especially the right one, and in doing that, somehow as he lunged forward it happened."

"Yes," murmured Brierly, "it is a very simple theory. It – it might have happened so."

"There wasn't any other way it could happen," muttered one of Doran's companions. And at that moment the wheels of an approaching vehicle were heard, and all turned to look toward the long black hearse, divested of its plumes, and with two or three thick blankets upon its velvet floor.

It was the doctor who superintended the lifting of the body, keeping the head covered, and when the hearse drove slowly away with its pathetic burden, he turned to Doran.

"I'll drive Mr. Brierly back to town, Doran," he said, "if you don't mind taking his wheel in charge;" and scarcely waiting for Doran's willing assent, he took Richard Brierly's arm and led him toward his phaeton.

The young man had picked up his brother's hat, as they lifted the body from the ground, and he now carried it in his hand, laying it gently upon his knees as he took his seat.

When the doctor had taken his place and picked up the reins he leaned out and looked about him. Two or three horsemen were riding into the wood toward them, and a carriage had halted at the side of the road, while a group of schoolboys, headed by Johnny, the bell ringer, were hurrying down the slope toward the water's edge.

"They're beginning to gather," the physician said, grimly. "Well, it's human nature, and your brother had a host of friends, Mr. Brierly."

Robert Brierly set his lips and averted his face for a moment.

"Doran," called the doctor. "Come here, will you."

Doran, who had begun to push the shining wheel up the slope, placed it carefully against a tree and came toward them, the doctor meanwhile turning to Brierly.

"Mr. Brierly, you are a stranger here. Will you let me arrange for you?"

The other nodded, and then said huskily: "But it hurts to take him to an undertaker's!"

"He shall not be taken there," and the doctor turned to Doran, now standing at the wheel.

"Mr. Doran, will you take my keys and ride ahead as fast as possible? Tell the undertaker, as you pass, to drive to my house. Then go on and open it. We will put the body in the private office. Do not remonstrate, Mr. Brierly. It is only what I would wish another to do for me and mine in a like affliction." And this was the rule by which this man lived his life, and because of which death had no terrors.

"I am a bachelor, you must know," the doctor said, as they drove slowly in the wake of the hearse. "And I have made my home and established my office in a cosy cottage near the village proper. It will save you the ordeal of strange eyes, and many questions, perhaps, if you will be my guest for a day or two, at least."

Robert Brierly turned and looked this friend in need full in the face for a moment; then he lifted his hand to brush a sudden moisture from his eye.

"I accept all your kindness," he said, huskily, "for I see that you are as sincere as you are kind."

When the body of Charles Brierly had been carried in and placed as it must remain until the inquest was at an end, and when the crowd of sorrowing, anxious and curious people had dispersed, the doctor, who was masterful at need, making Doran his lieutenant, arranged for the securing of a jury; and, after giving some quiet instructions, sent him away, saying:

"Tell the people it is not yet determined how or when we shall hold the inquiry. Miss Grant, who must be a witness, will hardly be able to appear at once, I fear," for, after looking to his guest's bodily comfort, the doctor had left him to be alone with his grief for a little while, and had paid a flying visit to Hilda Grant, who lived nearly three blocks away.

When at length the little house was quiet, and when the doctor and his heavy-hearted companion had made a pretence of partaking of luncheon, the former, having shut and locked the door upon the elderly African who served him, drew his chair close to that of his guest, and said:

"Are you willing to take counsel with me, Mr. Brierly? And are you quite fit and ready to talk about what is most important?"

"I am most anxious for your advice, and for information."

"Then, let us lose no time; there is much to be done."

"Doctor," Robert Brierly bent toward the other and placed a hand upon his knee. "There are emergencies which bring men together and reveal them, each to each, in a flash, as it were. I cannot

feel that you know me really; but I know you, and would trust you with my dearest possession, or my most dangerous secret. You will be frank with me, I know, if you speak at all; and I want you to tell me something."

"What is it?"

"You have told me how, in your opinion, my poor brother really met his death. Will you put yourself in my place, and tell me how you would act in this horrible emergency? What is the first thing you would do?"

The doctor's answer came after a moment's grave thought.

"I am, I think, a Christian," he said, gravely, "but I think – bah! I know that I would make my life's work to find out the truth about that murder, for that it was a murder, I solemnly believe."

CHAPTER IV

FERRARS

Robert Brierly caught his breath.

"And your reason?" he gasped, "for you have a reason other than the mere fact of the bullet-wound in the neck."

"I have seen just such deeds in the wild west and I know how they are done. But this is also professional knowledge. Besides, man, call reason to your aid! Oh, I expect too much. The hurt is too fresh, you can only feel now, but the man shot by accident, be it by his own hand or that of another, is not shot twice."

"Good heavens, no!"

"But when one who creeps upon his victim unawares, shoots him from behind, and, as he falls, fearing the work is not completed, shoots again, the victim, as you must see, receives the wound further to the front as the body falls forward and partially turns in falling. Do you see? Do you comprehend?"

"Yes." Brierly shuddered.

"Brierly, this talk is hurting you cruelly. Let us drop details, or postpone them."

"Not the essential ones. I must bear what I must. Go on, doctor. I quite agree with you. It looks like a murder, and we must – I must know the truth – must find the one who did the deed. Doctor, advise me."

"About – "

"How to begin, no time should be lost."

"That means a good detective, as soon as possible. Do you chance to know any of these gentry?"

"I – No, indeed! I suppose a telegram to the chief of police – "

"Allow me," broke in Doctor Barnes. "May I make a suggestion?"

"Anything. I seem unable to think."

"And no wonder! I know the right man for you if he is in Chicago. You see, I was in hospital practice for several years, and have also had my share of prison experience. While thus employed I met a man named Ferrars, an Englishman, who for some years has spent the greater part of his time in this country, in Chicago, in fact. There's a mystery and a romance attached to the man, or his history. He's not connected with any of the city offices, but he is one of three retired detectives – retired, that is, from regular work – who work together at need when they feel a case to be worth their efforts. I think a case like this will be certain to attract Ferrars."

"And he is your choice of the three?"

The doctor smiled. "The others are married," he said, "and not so ready to go far afield as is Ferrars."

"You think him skilful?"

"None better."

"Then, do you know his address?"

Brierly got up and began to walk about, his eyes beginning to glow with the excitement so long suppressed. "Because we can't get him here too soon."

"I agree with you. And now one thing more. To give him every advantage he should not be known, and the inquest should not begin until he is here."

"Can that be managed?"

"I think so."

Brierly was now nervously eager. He seemed to have shaken off the stupor which at first had seemed to seize upon and hold him, and his questions and suggestions came thick and fast. It ended, of course, in his putting himself into the doctor's hands, and accepting his plans and suggestions entirely. And very soon, Dr. Barnes, having given his factotum distinct instructions as regarded visitors, and inquiries, had set off, his medicine case carried ostentatiously in his hand, not for the telegraph office, but for the cottage, close by, where Hilda Grant found a home.

It was a small, neatly-kept cottage, and Mrs. Marcy, a gentle, kindly widow, and the young teacher were its only occupants.

The widow met him at the door, her face anxious, her voice the merest whisper.

"Doctor, tell me; do you think she will really be ill?"

"Why no, Mrs. Marcy; at least not for long. It has been a shock, of course; a great shock. But she –"

"Ah, doctor, she is heart-broken. I – I think I surely may tell you. It will help you to understand. They were engaged, and for a little while, such a pitiful little while it seems now, they have been so happy."

The doctor was silent a moment, his eyes turned away.

"And now," went on the good woman, "she will be lonelier than ever. You know she was very lonely here at first. She has no relatives nearer than a cousin anywhere in the world, to her knowledge. And he has never been to see her. He lives in Chicago, too, not so far away."

"Yes, surely he ought to visit her now, really. Just ask her if I may come up, Mrs. Marcy. I – I'm glad you told me of this. Thank you. It will help me."

Ten minutes later Doctor Barnes was hastening toward the telegraph office, where he sent away this singular and wordy message:

"Frank Ferrars, No. ... Street, Chicago —

"Your cousin, Miss Hilda Grant, is ill, and in trouble. It is a case in which you are needed as much as I. Come, if possible, by first evening train.

"Walter Barnes."

"That will fetch him," he mused, as he hastened homeward. "Ferrars never breaks a promise, though I little expected to have to remind him of it within the year."

"Well," began Brierly, when he entered his own door. "Have you seen her? Was she willing?"

"Willing and anxious. She is a brave and sensible little woman. She will do her part, and she has never for one moment believed in the theory of an accident."

"And she will receive me?"

"This evening. She insists that we hold our council there, in her presence. At first I objected, on account of her weakness, but she is right in her belief that we should be most secure there, and Ferrars should not be seen abroad to-night. We will have to take Mrs. Marcy into our confidence, in part at least, but she can be trusted. We will all be observed, more or less, for a few days. But, of course, I shall put Ferrars up for the night. That will be the thing to do after he has spent a short evening with his cousin."

Brierly once more began his restless pacing to and fro, turning presently to compare his watch with the doctor's Dutch clock.

"It will be the longest three hours I ever passed," he said, and a great sigh broke from his lips.

But, before the first hour had passed, a boy from the telegraph office handed in a blue envelope, and the doctor hastily broke the seal and read —

"Be with you at 6.20.

"Ferrars."

When the first suburban train for the evening halted, puffing, at the village station, Doctor Barnes waiting upon the platform, saw a man of medium height and square English build step down from the smoking car and look indifferently about him.

There was the usual throng of gaping and curious villagers, and some of them heard the stranger say, as he advanced toward the doctor, who waited with his small medicine case in his hand —

"Pardon me; is this doctor — doctor Barnes?" And when the doctor nodded he asked quickly, "How is she?"

"Still unnerved and weak. We have had a terrible shock, for all of us."

When the two men had left the crowd of curious loungers behind them the doctor said —

"It is awfully good of you, Ferrars, to come so promptly at my call. Of course, I could not explain over the wires. But, you understand."

"I understand that you needed me, and as I'm good for very little, save in one capacity, I, of course, supposed there was a case for me. The evening paper, however, gave me — or so I fancy — a hint of the business. Is it the young schoolmaster?"

The doctor started. It seemed impossible that the news had already found its way into print.

"Some one has made haste," he said, scornfully.

"Some one always does in these cases, and the *Journal* has a 'special correspondent' in every town and village in the country almost. It was only a few lines." He glanced askance at his companion as he spoke. "And it was reported an accident or suicide."

"It was a murder!"

"I thought so."

"You — why?"

"'The victim was found,' so says the paper, 'face downward, or nearly so.' 'Fallen forward,' those were the words. Was that the case?"

"Yes."

"Well, did you ever see or hear of a suicide who had fallen directly forward and face downward, supposing him to have shot himself?"

"No, no."

"On the other hand, have you ever noted that a man taken unawares, shot from the side, or rear, falls forward? If shot standing, that is. It is only when he receives a face charge that he falls backward."

"I had not thought of that, and yet it looks simple and rational enough," and then, while they walked down the quiet street running parallel with Main, and upon which Mrs. Marcy's cottage stood, the doctor told the story of the morning, briefly but clearly, adding, at the end, "In telling this much, I am telling you actually all that I know."

"All — concerning Miss Grant, too?"

"Everything."

The doctor did not lift his eyes from the path before them, and again the detective shot a side glance from the corner of his eye, and the shadow of a smile crossed his face.

"How does it happen that this brother is here so — I was about to say — opportunely?"

"He told me that he came by appointment, but on an earlier train than he had at first intended to take, to pass Sunday with his brother."

"Now see," mused Ferrars, "what little things, done or left undone, shape or shorten our lives! If he had telegraphed to his brother announcing his earlier arrival, there would have been no target practice, but a walk to the station instead."

The doctor sighed, and for a few moments walked on in silence. Then, as they neared the cottage he almost stopped short and turned toward the detective.

"I'm afraid you will think me a sad bungler, Ferrars. I should have told you at once that Robert Brierly awaits us at Mrs. Marcy's cottage."

"Robert Brierly? Is that his name? I wonder if he can be the Robert Brierly who has helped to make one of our morning papers so bright and breezy. A rising young journalist, in fact. But it's probably another of the name."

"I don't know. He has not spoken of himself. Will it suit you to meet him at once?"

"We don't often get the chance to begin as would best suit us, we hunters of our kind. I would have preferred to go first to the scene of the death, but I suppose the ground has been trampled over and over, and, besides, I don't want to advertise myself until I am better informed at least. Go on, we will let our meeting come as it will."

But things seldom went on as they would for long, when Frank Ferrars was seeking his way toward a truth or fact. They found Mrs. Marcy at the door, and she at once led them to the upper room which looked out upon the side and rear of the little lawn, and was screened from inlookers, as well as from the sun's rays, by tall cherry trees at the side, and thick and clinging morning glory vines at the back.

"You'll be quite safe from intrusion here," she murmured, and left them as she had received them at the door.

If Doctor Barnes had feared for his patient's strength, and dreaded the effect upon her of the coming interview, he was soon convinced that he had misjudged the courage and will power of this slight, soft-eyed, low-voiced and unassertive young woman. She was very pale, and her eyes looked out from their dark circles like wells of grief. But no tears fell from them, and the low pathetic voice did not falter when she said, after the formal presentation, and before either of the others had spoken:

"I have asked to be present at this interview, Mr. Ferrars, and am told that it rests with you whether I am admitted to your confidences. Charles Brierly is my betrothed, and I would to God I had yielded to his wish and married him a week ago. Then no one could have shut me out from ought that concerns him, living or dead. In the sight of heaven he is my husband, for we promised each other eternal faithfulness with our hands clasped above his mother's Bible."

Francis Ferrars was a singular mixture of sternness and gentleness, of quick decision at need and of patient considerateness, and he now took one of the cold little hands between his own, and gently but firmly led her to the cosy chair from which she had arisen.

"You have proved your right to be here, and no one will dispute it. We may need your active help soon, as much as we need and desire your counsel and your closer knowledge of the dead man now."

In moments of intense feeling conventionalities fall away from us and strong soul speaks to strong soul. While they awaited the coming of the doctor and Francis Ferrars, Hilda Grant and Robert Brierly had been unable to break through the constraint which seemed to each to be the mental attitude of the other, and then, too, both were engrossed with the same thought, the coming of the detective, and the possibilities this suggested, for underlying the grievous sorrow of both brother and sweetheart lay the thought, the silent appeal for justice as inherent in our poor human nature as is humanity itself.

But Hilda's sudden claim, her prayer for recognition struck down the barrier of strangeness and the selfishness of sorrow, than which sometimes nothing can be more exclusive, in the mind and heart of Robert Brierly, and he came swiftly to her side, as she sank back, pallid and panting, upon her cushions.

"Miss Grant, my sister; no other claim is so strong as yours. It was to meet you, to know you, that I set out for this place to-day. In my poor brother's last letter – you shall read it soon – he said, 'I am going to give you something precious, Rob; a sister. It is to meet her that I have asked you to come just now.' I claim that sister, and need her now if never before. Don't look upon me as a

stranger, but as Charlie's brother, and yours." He placed his hand over hers as it rested weakly upon the arm of her chair, and as it turned and the chill little fingers closed upon his own, he held it for a moment and then, releasing it gently, drew a seat beside her and turned toward the detective.

"Mr. Ferrars, your friend has assured me that I may hope for your aid. Is that so?"

"When I have heard all that you can tell me, I will answer," replied Ferrars. "If I see a hope or chance of unravelling what now looks like a mystery – should it be proved a mystery – I will give you my promise, and my services."

He had seated himself almost opposite Hilda Grant, and while he quietly studied her face, he addressed the doctor.

"Tell me," he said, "all you know and have been told by others, and be sure you omit not the least detail."

Beginning with the appearance of Mr. Doran at his office door, with the panting and perspiring black pony, the doctor detailed their drive and his first sight of the victim, reviewing his examination of the body in detail, while the detective listened attentively and somewhat to the surprise of the others, without interruption, until the narrator had reached the point when, accompanied by Brierly, he had followed the hearse, with its pitiful burden, back to the village. Then Ferrars interposed.

"A moment, please," taking from an inner pocket a broad, flat letter-case and selecting from it a printed card, which, with a pencil, he held out to the doctor. "Be so good," he said, "as to sketch upon the blank back of this the spot where you found the dead man, the mound in full, with the road indicated, above and beyond it. I remember you used to be skilful at sketching things."

CHAPTER V IN CONSULTATION

When the doctor had completed his hasty sketch, he returned the card upon which it was made, to the detective and silently awaited his comment.

"It is very helpful," said Ferrars. "It would seem, then, that just opposite the mound the lake makes an inward curve?"

"Yes."

"And that the centre of the mound corresponds to the central or nearest point of the curve?"

The doctor nodded assent.

"Now am I right in thinking that anything occurring at this central point would be unseen from the road?"

"Quite right. The mound rises higher than the road, and its length shuts off the view at either end, that and the line of the road, which curves away from the lake at the north end, and runs in an almost straight direction for some distance at the other."

"I see." And again for a moment Ferrars consulted the sketch. Then —

"Did you measure the distance between the target and the spot where the body was found?"

"No. It was the usual distance for practice, I should think."

"It was rather a long range," interposed Brierly. "I am something of a shot myself and I noticed that."

Again the detective pondered over the sketch.

"By this time I dare say," he said presently, "there will be any number of curious people in the wood and about that spot."

"I doubt it," replied Doctor Barnes. "I thought of that, and spoke to Doran. Mr. Brierly was so well liked by all that it only needed a word to keep the men and boys from doing anything that might hinder a thorough investigation. Two men are upon the road just below the school-house to turn back the thoughtless curious ones. It was Doran's foresight," added the honest physician. "I suppose you will wish to explore the wood near the mound?"

Ferrars laid aside the sketch. "As the coroner," he said, "you can help me. Of course, you can have no doubt as to the nature of the shooting. There could be no mistake."

"None. The shot at the back could not have been self-inflicted."

"Then if you can rely upon your constables and this man Doran, let them make a quiet inquiry up and down the wood road in search of any one who may have driven over it between the hours of —"

"Eight and ten o'clock," said Hilda Grant. "He," meaning her late friend, "left his boarding place at eight o'clock, or near it, and he was found shortly before ten."

Her speech was low and hesitating, but it did not falter.

"Thank you," said the detective, and turned again to the doctor.

"Next," said he, "if you can find a trusty man, who will find out for us if any boat or boats have been seen about the lake shore during those hours, it will be another step in the right direction. And now, you have told me that you suspect no one; that there is no clue whatever." He glanced from one to the other. "Still we are told that very often by those who should know best, but who were not trained to such searching. To begin, I must know something, Mr. Brierly, about your brother and his past. Is he your only brother?"

"Yes. We lost a sister ten years ago, a mere child. There were no other children."

"And — your parents?"

"Are both dead."

"Ah! Mr. Brierly, give me, if you please, a sketch of your life and of your brother's, dating, let us say, from the time of your father's death."

If the request was unexpected or unwelcome to Robert Brierly he made no sign, but began at once.

"If I do not go into details sufficiently, Mr. Ferrars," he said, by way of preamble, "you will, of course, interrogate me."

The detective nodded, and Brierly went on.

"My father was an Episcopalian clergyman, and, at the time of his death, we were living in one of the wealthy suburbs of Chicago, where he had held a charge for ten years, and where we remained for six years after he gave up the pulpit. Being in comfortable circumstances, we found it a most pleasant place of residence. My sister's death brought us our first sorrow, and it was soon followed by the loss of our mother. We continued to live, however, in the old home until my brother and I were ready to go to college, and then my father shut up the house and went abroad with a party of congenial friends. My father was not a business man, and the man to whom he had confided the management of his affairs misarranged them during his absence, to what extent we never fully knew until after my father's death, when we found ourselves, after all was settled, with something like fifteen thousand dollars each, and our educations. My brother had already begun to prepare for the ministry, and I had decided early to follow the career of a journalist."

"Are you the elder?" asked the detective.

"Yes." Brierly paused for further comment, but none came, and he resumed. "It had been the intention of my father that my brother and I should make the tour of the two continents when our studies were at an end; that is, our school days. He had made this same journey in his youth, and he had even mapped out routes for us, and told us of certain strange and little explored places which we must not miss, such as the rock temples of Kylas in Central India, and various wonders of Egypt. It was a favourite project of his. 'It will leave you less money, boys,' he used to say, 'but it will give what can never be taken from you. When a man knows his own world, he is better fitted for the next.' And so, after much discussion we determined to make the journey. Indeed, to Charley it began to seem a pilgrimage, in which love, duty, and pleasure intermingled."

He paused, and Hilda turned away her face as a long sighing breath escaped his lips.

"Shortly after our return I took up journalistic work in serious earnest, and my brother, having been ordained, was about to accept a charge when he met with an accident which was followed by a long illness. When he arose from this, his physicians would not hear of his assuming the labours of a pastor over a large and active suburban church, and, as my brother could not bear to be altogether idle, and the country was thought to be the place for him, it ended in his coming here, to take charge of the little school. He was inordinately fond of children, and a born instructor, so it seemed to me. He was pleased with the beauty of the place and the quiet of it, from the first, and he was not long in finding his greatest happiness here."

His voice sank, and he turned a face in which gratitude and sorrow blended, upon the girl who suddenly covered her own with her trembling hands.

But the detective, with a new look of intentness upon his face, and without a moment's pause, asked quickly.

"Then you have been in this place before, of course?"

"No, I have not. For the first three months Charley was very willing to come to me, in the city. Then came a very busy time for me and he came twice, somewhat reluctantly, I thought. Six months ago I was sent to New Mexico to do some special work, and returned to the city on Tuesday last." His voice broke, and he got up and walked to the window farthest from the group.

While he had been speaking, Ferrars had scribbled aimlessly and a stroke at a time, as it seemed, upon the margin of the printed side of the card which bore the sketch made by Doctor Barnes; and now, while Hilda's face was again turned away, the young man at the window still

stood with his back towards all in the room, he pushed the card from the edge of the table, and shot a significant glance toward the doctor.

Picking up the card, Doctor Barnes glanced at it carelessly, and then replaced it upon the table, having read these words —

"I wish to speak with her alone. Make it a professional necessity."

As Brierly turned toward them once more the detective turned to the young girl. "I would like to hear something from you, Miss Grant, if you find yourself equal to it."

Hilda set her lips in firm lines, and after a moment said steadily —

"I am quite at your service."

"One minute." The doctor arose and addressed himself to the detective.

"I feel sure that it will be best for Miss Grant that she talk with you alone. As her physician, I will caution her against putting too great a restraint upon herself, upon her feelings. While you talk with her, Ferrars, Mr. Brierly and I will go back to my quarters, unless you bid us come back."

"I do not," interposed the detective. "I will join you soon, and if need be, you can then return, doctor."

At first it seemed as if Hilda were about to remonstrate. But she caught the look of intelligence that flashed from his eyes to hers, and she sat in silence while Doctor Barnes explained the route to his cottage and murmured a low good-bye, while Brierly took her hand and bent over her with a kind adieu.

"I may see you to-morrow," he whispered. "You will let me come, sister?" The last word breathed close to her ear.

Her lips moved soundlessly, but he read her eager consent in her timid return of his hand clasp and the look in her sad, grey eyes, and followed the doctor from the room.

When Frank Ferrars had closed the door behind the two men, he wasted no time in useless words, but, seating himself opposite the girl, and so close that he could catch, if need be, her faintest whisper, he began, his own tones low and touched with sympathy —

"Miss Grant," he said, "I already feel assured that you know how many things must be considered before we can ever begin such a search as I foresee before me. Of course it may happen that before the end of the coroner's inquest some clue or key to the situation may have developed. But, if I have heard all, or, rather, if there has not been some important fact or feature overlooked, we must go behind the scenes for our data, our hints and possible clues. Do you comprehend me?"

Hilda Grant had drawn herself erect, and was listening intently with her clear eyes fixed upon his face, and she seemed with her whole soul to be studying this man, while, with her ears she took in and comprehended his every word.

"You mean," she answered slowly, "that there may be something in himself or some event or fact in his past, or that of his family, which has brought about this?" She turned away her face. She could not put the awful fact into words.

"I knew you would understand me, and it is not to his past alone that I must look for help, but to others."

"Do you mean mine?"

"Yes. You do understand!"

There was a look of relief in his eyes. His lips took on a gentler curve. "I see that you are going to help me."

"If it is in my power, I surely am. Where shall we begin?"

"Tell me all that you can about Charles Brierly, all that he has told you about himself. Will it be too hard?"

"No matter." She drew herself more erect. "I think if you will let me tell my own story briefly, and then fill it out at need, by interrogation, it will be easiest for me."

"And best for me. Thank you." He leaned back and rested his hands upon the arms of his chair.

"I am ready to hear you," he said, and withdrew his full gaze from her face, letting his eyelids fall and sitting thus with half-closed eyes.

"Of course," she began, "it was only natural, or so it appeared to me, that we should become friends soon, meeting, as we must, daily, and being so constantly brought together, as upper and under teachers in this little village school. He never seemed really strange to me, and we seemed thrown upon each other for society, for the young people of the village held aloof, because of our newness, and our position, I suppose, and the people of the hotels and boarding-houses found, naturally, a set, or sets, by themselves. I grew up in what you might call a religious atmosphere, and when I knew that he was a minister of the gospel, I felt at once full confidence in him and met his friendly advances quite frankly. I think we understood each other very soon. You perhaps have not been told that he filled a vacancy, taking the place of a young man who was called away because of his mother's illness, and who did not return, giving up the school at her request. It was in April, a year ago, that he – Charlie – took up the work, coming back, as I did, after the summer vacation. It was after that that he began telling me about himself a little; to speak often of his brother, who was, to his eyes, a model of young manhood and greatly his intellectual superior."

She paused a moment, and then with a little proud lifting of her rounded chin, resumed —

"I was not quite willing to agree as to the superiority; for Charles Brierly was as bright, as talented and promising a young man, as good and as modest as any I ever knew or hope to know, and I have met some who rank high as pastors and orators."

"I can well believe you," he said, with his eyes upon her face, and his voice was sincere and full of sympathy.

"We were not engaged until quite recently. Although we both, I think, understood ourselves and each other long before. And now, what more can I say? He has told me much of his school days, of his student life, and, of course, of his brother's also. In fact, without meaning it, he has taught me to stand somewhat in awe of this highly fastidious, faultless and much-beloved brother, but I have heard of no family quarrel, no enemy, no unpleasant episode of any sort. For himself, he told me, and I believe his lightest word, that he never cared for any other woman; had never been much in women's society, in fact, owing to his almost constant study and travel. Here in the village all was his friends; his pupils were all his adorers, young and old alike were his admirers, and he had room in his heart for all. No hand in Glenville was ever raised against him, I am sure."

"You think then that it was perhaps an accident, a mistake?" He was eyeing her keenly from beneath his drooping lashes.

"No!" She sprang suddenly to her feet and stood erect before him. "No, Mr. Ferrars, I do not! I cannot. I was never in my life superstitious. I do not believe it is superstition that compels me to feel that Charles Brierly was murdered of intent, and by an enemy, an enemy who has stalked him unawares, for money perhaps, and who has planned cunningly, and hid his traces well."

CHAPTER VI

"WHICH?"

"Give me a few moments of your time, doctor, after your guest has retired for the night."

For more than two hours after his parting with Hilda Grant, Ferrars had talked, first with Robert Brierly alone, and then with the doctor as a third party. At the end, the three had gone together to look upon the face of the dead, and now, as the doctor nodded over his shoulders and silently followed, or, rather, guided Brierly from the room and toward his sleeping apartment, the detective turned back, and when they were out of hearing, removed the covering from the still face, and taking a lamp from the table near, stood looking down upon the dead.

"No," he murmured at last, as he replaced the lamp and turned back to the side of the bier. "You never earned such a fate. You must have lived and died a good man; an honest man, and yet – " He turned quickly at the sound of the opening door. "Doctor, come here and tell me how your keen eyes and worldly intelligence weighed, measured and gauged this man who lies here with that look, that inscrutable look they all wear once they have seen the mystery unveiled. What manner of man did you find him?"

Doctor Barnes came closer and gazed reverently down upon the dead face.

"There lies a man who could better afford to face the mystery suddenly, without warning, than you or I or any other living man I know. A good man, a true Christian gentleman I honestly believe, too modest perhaps to ever claim and hold his true place in this grasping world. That he should be struck down by the hand of an assassin is past belief, and yet – " He paused abruptly and bent down to replace the covering over the still, handsome face.

"And yet," repeated the detective, "do you really think that this man was murdered?"

"Ferrars!" Both men were moving away from the side of the bier, one on either hand, and, as they came together at its foot, the speaker put a hand upon the shoulder of the detective. "Tomorrow I hope you will thoroughly overlook the wood road beyond the school house, the lake shore, from the village to the knoll or mound; and the thin strip of wood between, and then tell me if you think it possible for any one, however stupid or erratic of aim, to shoot by accident a man standing in that place. There is no spot from which a bullet could have been fired whence a man could not have been seen perfectly by that figure by the lake side. The trees are so scattered, the bushes so low, the view up and down so open. It's impossible!"

"That is your fixed opinion?"

"It is. Nothing but actual proof to the contrary would change it."

When they had passed from the room and the doctor had softly closed the door, leaving the dead alone in the silence and the shaded lamp-light, they paused again, face to face, in the outer office.

"Have you any suggestions as regards the inquest, Ferrars?" asked the one.

"I have been thinking about that foolish lad, the one who saw poor Brierly in the wood. Could you get him here before the inquiry? We might be able to learn more in this way. You know the lad, of course?"

"Of course. There will be very little to be got from him. But I'll have him here for you."

"Do so. And the lady, the one who drove the pony; you will call her, I suppose?"

"Certainly."

"That is all, I think. If you can drive me to the spot very early, before we breakfast even, I would like it. You need not stop for me. I can find my way back, prefer to, in fact. You say it is not far?"

"Little more than half a mile from the school-house."

"Then – good night, doctor."

Doctor Barnes occupied a six-room cottage with a mansard, and he had fitted up the room originally meant to be a sitting-room, for his own sleeping apartment. It was at the front of the main cottage, and back of it was the inner office where the body lay, the outer office being in a wing built out from this rear room and opening conveniently outward, in view of the front entrance, and very close to a little side gate. A porch fitted snugly into the angle made by the former sitting-room and this outer office, and both of these rooms could be entered from this convenient porch. Robert Brierly occupied the room opposite that assigned the detective with the width of the hall between them, and the doctor, although Ferrars did not know this, had camped down in his outer office.

Half an hour after he had parted from the doctor, Frank Ferrars, as he was called by his nearest and most familiar friends, opened the door upon the corner porch and stepped noiselessly out. When he believed that he had found an unusual case – and he cared for no others – he seldom slept until he had thought out some plan of work, adopted some theory, or evolved a possibility, or, as he whimsically termed it, a "stepping stone" toward clearer knowledge.

He had answered the doctor's summons with little thought of what it might mean, or lead to, and simply because it was from "Walt." Barnes. Then he had heard the doctor's brief story with some surprise, and an inclination to think it might end, after all, in a case of accidental shooting, or self-inflicted death. But when he looked into the woeful eyes of lovely Hilda Grant, and clasped the hand of the dead man's brother, the case took on a new interest. Here was no commonplace village maiden hysterical and forlorn, no youth breathing out dramatic vows of vengeance upon an unknown foe. At once his heart went out to them, his sympathy was theirs, and the sympathy of Francis Ferrars was of a very select nature indeed.

And thus he had looked at the beautiful refined face of the dead man, a face that told of gentleness, sweetness, loyalty, all manifest in the calm dignity of death. Not a strong face, as his brother's face was strong, but manly with the true Christian manliness, and strong with the strength of truth. Looking upon this face, all thought of self-destruction forsook the detective, and he stood, after that first long gaze, vowed to right this deadly wrong in the only way left to a mortal.

But how strange that such a man, in such a place, should be snatched out of life by the hand of an assassin! He must think over it, and he could think best when passing slowly along some quiet by-way or street. So he closed his door softly, and all unconscious that he was observed from the window of the outer office, he vaulted across the low fence, striking noiselessly upon the soft turf on the further side; and, after a moment of hesitation, turned the corner and went down Main Street.

Past the shops, the fine new church, the two hotels, one new and one old. Past the little park and around it to the street, terraced and tree planted, where the more pretentious dwellings and several modish new houses, built for the summer boarder, stood. It was a balmy night. Every star seemed out, and there was a moon, bright, but on the wane.

Ferrars walked slowly upon the soft turf, avoiding the boards and stones of the walks and street crossings. Now and then he paused to look at some fair garden, lovely in the moonlight, or up at the stars, and once, at least, at a window, open to the breezes of night and revealing that which sent Ferrars homeward presently with a question on his lips. He paced the length of the terraced street, and passed by the cottage where Hilda Grant waked and wept perchance, and as he re-entered his room silently and shadow-like, he said to himself —

"Is it fate or Providence that prompts us to these reasonless acts? I may be wrong, I may be mistaken, but I could almost believe that I have found my first clue."

And yet he had heard nothing, and yet all he had seen was a woman's shadow, reflected fitfully by the waning moon, as she paced her room to and fro, to and fro, like some restless or tormented animal, and now and then lifted her arms aloft in despair? in malediction? in triumph? in entreaty? – which?

In spite of his brief rest, if rest it was, Ferrars was astir before sunrise: but, even so, he found the doctor awake before him, and his horse in waiting at the side gate.

They drove swiftly and were soon within sight of the Indian Mound.

"Show me first the place where the body was found," Ferrars had said to his guide as they set out, and when the two stood at this spot, which some one had marked with two small stakes, and the doctor had answered some brief questions regarding the road through the fringe of wood, the mound, and the formation of the lake shore further south or away from the town, the detective announced his wish to be left alone to pursue his work in his own way.

"Your guest will be astir early if I am not much mistaken," he said. "And you have Miss Grant to look after, and may be wanted for a dozen reasons before I return. I can easily walk back, and think you will see me at the breakfast hour, which you must on no account delay."

Two hours later, and just as the doctor's man had announced breakfast, the detective returned, and at once joined the two in the dining-room.

He said nothing of his morning excursion, but the doctor's quick eye noted his look of gravity, and a certain preoccupation of manner which Ferrars did not attempt to hide. Before the meal was ended Doctor Barnes was convinced that something was puzzling the detective, and troubling him not a little.

After breakfast, and while Brierly was for the moment absent from the porch where they had seated themselves with their cigars, Ferrars asked —

"Where does the lady live who drove Mr. Doran's black pony yesterday. Is it at an hotel?"

"It is at the Glenville, an aristocratic family hotel on the terrace. She is a Mrs. Jamieson."

"Do you know her?"

"She sent for me once to prescribe for some small ailment not long ago."

"Has she been summoned?"

"She will be."

"If there was any one in the woods, or approaching the mound by the road from the south, she should have seen them, or him; even a boat might have been seen through the trees for some distance southward, could it not?"

"Yes. For two miles from the town the lake is visible from the wood road. Ah! here comes Doran and our constable."

For half an hour the doctor was busy with Doran, the constable, and a number of other men who had or wished to have some small part to play in this second act of the tragedy, the end of which no one could foresee. Then, having dispatched them on their various missions, the doctor set out to inquire after the welfare of Hilda Grant; and Robert Brierly, who could not endure his suspense and sorrow in complete inaction, asked permission to accompany him, thus leaving the detective, who was quite in the mood for a little solitude just then, in possession of the porch, three wicker chairs and his cigar.

But not for long. Before he had smoked and wrinkled his brows, as was his habit when things were not developing to his liking, and pondered ten minutes alone, he heard the click of the front gate, and turned in his chair to see a lady, petite, graceful, and dressed in mourning, coming toward him with quick, light steps. She was looking straight at him as she came, but as he rose at her approach, she stopped short, and standing a few steps from the porch, said crisply —

"Your pardon. I have made a mistake. I am looking for Doctor Barnes."

"He has gone out for a short time only. Will you be seated, madam, and wait?"

She advanced a step and stopped irresolute.

"I suppose I must, unless," coming close to the lower step, "unless you can tell me, sir, what I wish to know."

"If it is a question of medicine, madam, I fear —"

"It is not," she broke in, her voice dropping to a lower note. "It is about the – the inquiry or examination into the death of the poor young man who – but you know, of course."

"I have heard. The inquest is held at one o'clock."

"Ah! And do you know if the – the witnesses have been notified as yet?"

"They are being summoned now. As the doctor's guest I have but lately heard him sending out the papers."

"Oh, indeed!" The lady put a tiny foot upon the step as if to mount, and then withdrew it. "I think, if I may leave a message with you, sir," she said, "I will not wait."

"Most certainly," he replied.

"I chanced to be driving through the wood yesterday when the body was discovered near the Indian Mound, and am told that I shall be wanted as a witness. I do not understand why."

"Possibly a mere form, which is nevertheless essential."

"I had engaged to go out with a yachting party," she went on, "and before I withdraw from the excursion I wish to be sure that I shall really be required. My name is Mrs. Jamieson, and –"

"Then I can assure you, Mrs. Jamieson, that you are, or will be wanted, at least. My friend has sent a summons to a Mrs. Jamieson of the Glenville House."

"That is myself," the lady said, and turned to go. "Of course then I must be at hand."

She nodded slightly and went away, going with a less appearance of haste down the street and so from his sight.

When she was no longer visible the detective resumed his seat, and relighted his cigar, making, as he did so, this very unprofessional comment —

"I hate to lose sight of a pretty woman, until I am sure of the colour of her eyes."

And yet Francis Ferrars had never been called, in any sense, a "ladies' man."

CHAPTER VII

RENUNCIATION

Ferrars had predicted that nothing would be gained by the inquest, and the result proved him a prophet.

Peter Kramer, the poor half-wit who had given the first clue to the whereabouts of the murdered man, was found, and his confidence won by much coaxing, and more sweets and shining pennies, the only coin which Peter would ever recognise as such. But the result was small. Asked had he seen the teacher, the reply was, "Yep." Asked where, "Most by Injun hill." Asked what doing, "Settin' down."

"Had he heard the pistol fired?" asked the doctor.

"Un! Uh! Heard nawthin."

"And whom did you see, Peter, besides the teacher?"

Again the look of affright in the dull eyes, the arm lifted as in self-protection, and the only word they could coax from his lips was, "Ghost!" uttered in evident fear and trembling.

And this was repeated at the inquest. This, and no more, from Peter.

Mrs. Fry, Charles Brierly's landlady, told how the dead man had appeared at breakfast, and her testimony did not accord with the statement of her little daughter.

"Miss Grant has told me of my little girl's mistake," she said. "Mr. Brierly was down-stairs unusually early that morning, and he did not look quite as well as usual. He looked worried, in fact, and ate little. He was always a small eater, and I said something about his eating even less than usual, I can't recall the exact words. Nellie of course, did not observe his worried look, as I did, and quoted me wrong. Mr. Brierly left the house at once after leaving the table. I did not think of it at first, but it came to me this morning that as he did not carry any books with him, he must of course have meant to come back for them, and – " She paused.

"And, of course," suggested the coroner, "he must have had his pistol upon his person when he came down to breakfast? Is that your meaning?"

"Yes, sir."

The weapon, found near the dead man's hand as it had doubtless fallen from it, was there in evidence, as it had been picked up with two of the chambers empty.

That it was not a case of murder for plunder was proven, or so they thought, by the fact that the dead man's watch was found upon his person; his pockets containing a small sum of money, pencils, knives, note book, a small picture case, closed with a spring, and containing Hilda Grant's picture, and a letter from his brother.

Hilda Grant's brief testimony did not agree with that of Mrs. Fry.

"She saw her lover, alive, for the last time on the evening before his death. He was in good spirits, and if there was anything troubling him he gave no sign of it. He was by nature quiet and rather reserved," she said.

"Yes, she knew his habit of sometimes going to the lake shore beyond the town to practice at target-shooting, but when he did not appear at his post at nine o'clock, she never thought to send to the lake shore at first, because he usually returned from his morning exercise before nine o'clock; and so her first thought had been to send to Mrs. Fry's."

When the doctor and Robert were about to leave the scene of the murder, among other instructions given to Doran had been this:

"Don't say anything in town about Mr. Brierly's arrival; you know how curious our people are, and we would have a lot of our curiosity lovers hovering around my place to see and hear and ask questions. Just caution the others, will you?"

Doran held an acknowledged leadership over the men with whom he consorted, and the group willingly preserved silence. Later, when Doctor Barnes explained to Ferrars how he had kept the curious away from his door, and from Brierly, he thought the detective's gratification because of this rather strange, just at first, and in excess of the cause.

"You couldn't have done a better thing," Ferrars had declared. "It's more than I had ventured to hope. Keep Brierly's identity as close as possible until the inquest is called, and then hold it back, and do not put him on the stand until the last."

After Mrs. Fry, the boy Peter and Hilda Grant had been questioned, Samuel Doran took the witness chair, telling of his summons from Miss Grant, of the separation of the group at the Indian Mound, of his meeting with Mrs. Jamieson, of the discovery made by his two companions and of all that followed. And then Mrs. Jamieson was called.

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