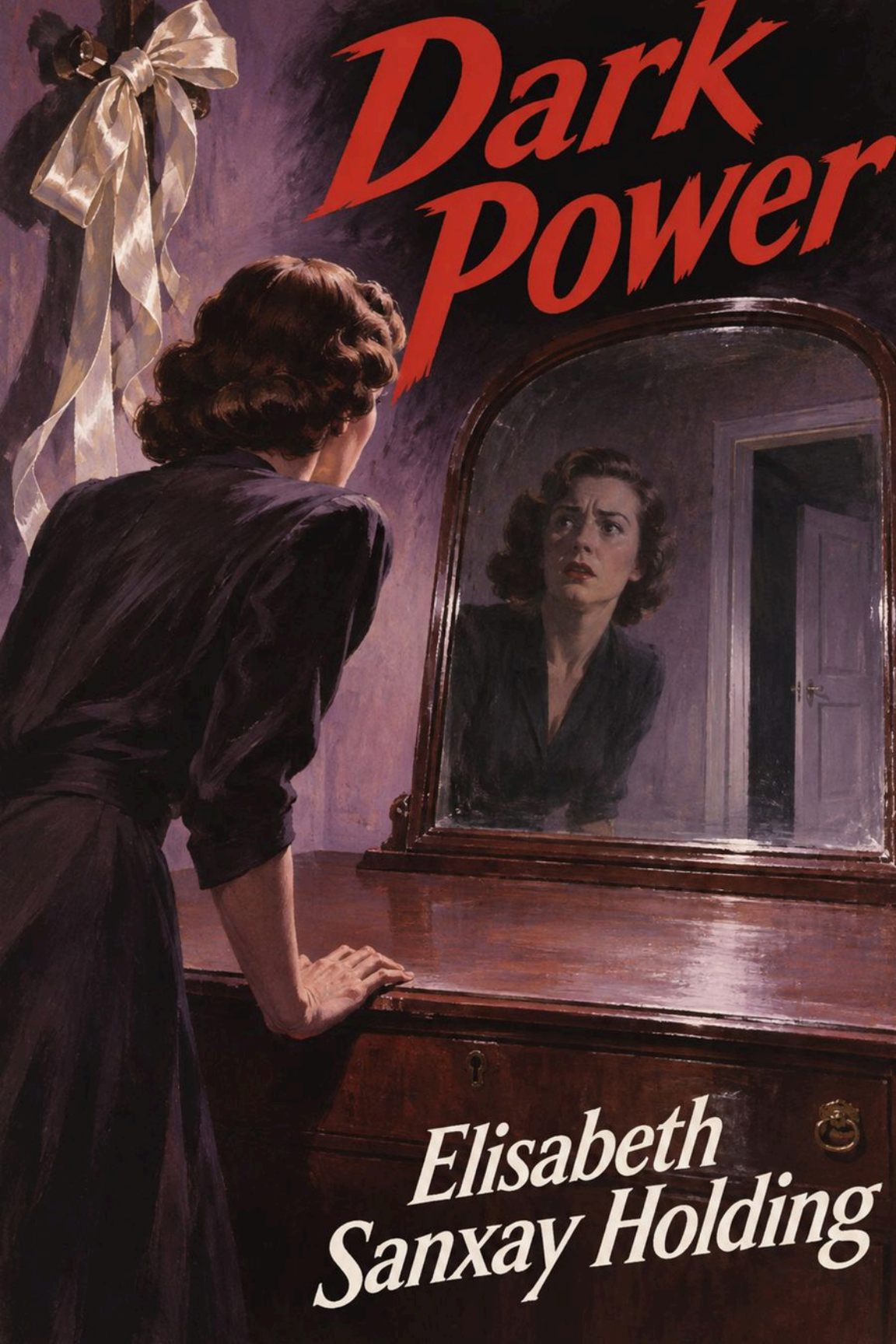

Dark Power
Elisabeth Sanxay Holding

PIPCUB EDITIONS

# Dark Power

Elisabeth Sanxay Holding

THE AUTHOR



# Elisabeth Sanxay Holding

1889 – 1955

*Portrait interpretation after a documented likeness.*

# Elisabeth Sanxay Holding

Elisabeth Sanxay Holding was an American novelist who wrote both social fiction and suspense. In her crime writing, danger often enters a household through a decision made under pressure. Her characters may need to preserve appearances at the very moment those appearances make the truth harder to tell.

Holding's attention to money, dependence and domestic routine gives familiar settings an uneasy force. The suspense can turn as much on what a person is able to say as on the discovery of an external clue.

# DARK POWER

ELISABETH
SANXAY
HOLDING

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# DARK POWER

# Chapter One.
## A Rescue

Once more Di went through the house. Everything was in immaculate order, yet it had somehow the look of a place that had been savagely looted and was now abandoned and forlorn. All the bureau tops were swept bare, all the tables; in every room there were great gaps, where Angelina's flamboyant things had been.

Angelina's own room was simply horrible. Standing in the doorway, Di felt the tears rise in her eyes at the sight of that desolate neatness where only yesterday there had been such wild and joyous disorder.

"I'm—tired," she said to herself, to excuse her weakness.

And she had reason to be tired. Angelina's wedding had been like a cyclone, and Di had been whirled along like a leaf in the gale. She had done everything for Angelina; she had seen the caterers and arranged for the wedding breakfast, she had sent out the invitations, had listed the presents and engaged detectives to keep an eye on them. She had stood for hours while Angelina's dresses were fitted upon her, she had packed Angelina's trunks and bags. And she had interviewed the reporters.

There had been plenty of reporters, for Angelina's wedding had been sensational, like everything else she did. The newspapers recalled to their readers the past exploits of the beautiful Angelina Herbert, her marriage at eighteen to Hiram Herbert, a millionaire of sixty, her suit for divorce three years later, charging her husband with artful "mental cruelty," her trip through Borneo all alone—except for a cousin, a secretary, a camera-man and one or two others—her attempt to fly in her own plane to Mexico that had ended in a crash near Asheville.

This second marriage of hers was very satisfactory for newspapers. She had married young Porter Blessington, another millionaire, who had spent six months in prison for assaulting an officer in the discharge of his duties, during a little fracas in a night club. She had gone in her car to meet him as he came out of jail and they were married the next week.

Set down in black and white, these things did not appeal to Di; if she had merely read about her in the newspapers, she would have thought Angelina a pretty objectionable type. But in actual life she had loved her.

"She just—forgot," she said to herself.

Just a little oversight on the part of the beautiful Angelina, to go off and leave Di without a penny. She had meant to do something regal, to make a lavish gift, but she had forgotten even to write the promised letter of recommendation that would help in getting another job.

With a sigh, she was closing the door of that desolately neat room, when she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror of the dressing-table. That image depressed her. She was pretty enough in a way, but it was not a way that anyone noticed; a slender, fair-haired girl with blue eyes and a detached, absent-minded air. She had exactly suited Angelina, because she was intelligent and well-bred, and marvelously patient, but there was only one Angelina. Other people would require different qualities in a secretary, more skill in shorthand and typing, a more business-like presence; other people would dislike her queer, cool little air of reserve. She knew, because before she had come to Angelina a year ago, she had gone about looking for a job.

"I've had more experience now," she thought. "I'm not *quite* such a fool now."

Only, in her heart, she wasn't so sure of that. Would anyone but a hopeless fool be in a situation like this? Another secretary would have reminded Angelina of the salary due her, of the letter of recommendation.

"Perhaps she'll remember and send me a check," thought Di.

In her own room she put on her hat and coat and went downstairs. Her trunk stood there, and her bag, and on the hall-table was a great mass of flowers which had yesterday decorated the drawing-room.

"Connor's late," she thought.

Naturally Connor, Angelina's superb chauffeur, would not put himself out for Di. He was stopping for her as a favor; his term of service was over, and the car was to be put into storage that afternoon. But she had to wait for him, because in her purse there was only one solitary quarter, not enough to get her trunk expressed.

"I'll find *something* to do to-morrow," she told herself.

But though she was resolute enough, she was not too hopeful. So many things had happened to her; she had known so many anxieties and sorrows. Even as a child, care had weighed upon her. Her father had been a clever and remarkably unsuccessful man, and she had had to share his vicissitudes.

"I make a *friend* of you, Di," he often said. "I don't put myself on a pedestal, like the average father. We're friends—pals."

Only, she had been such a very young friend, such a bewildered pal. It had been rather hard to hear about troubles which she could not help or even quite understand. Worst of all, he had sometimes talked to Di about her mother, in a tone of noble generosity.

"She was a fine woman, Di," he would say, "but she never understood me. Well—it was probably my own fault. I never could plead my own cause... I tell you, Di, a good woman can be pretty hard. *Damned* hard, sometimes."

Di had not enjoyed this. Her mother had died when she was four, but she had not forgotten her. And it was then, in those troubled childhood days, that she had developed her aloof reserve. She had learned to listen and to say nothing.

Her father had, apparently, intended never to die. For he had loved his child, in his way, and he would surely not have wanted to leave her without a penny, with no friends, with no preparation for life but a queer, patchy education from various small private schools. But he had died, and here she was.

"Plenty of girls are alone in the world," said Di to herself. "They almost always are, in books... I'll get a job to-morrow, all right."

The bell rang and she opened the door. It was Connor with a cigarette between his lips, sign of his perfect independence.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Yes," said Di. "Can you manage my trunk?"

"Sure!" he said, with lofty good-humor.

It was certainly not very large or very heavy; he got it down the steps and strapped it on behind the car.

"Come on, Miss!" he called.

Di was still in the hall.

"I thought we could just leave these flowers at St. Vincent's Hospital," she said.

"Haven't got time," said Connor.

She was in no position to argue the point just then, so she left the flowers, taking only a small bouquet for herself, and started down the steps. And met a young man running up.

He stopped at the sight of her, and took off his hat.

"Hello!" he said. "Am I too late? Show all over?"

"I don't quite—" she began, puzzled.

"The wedding," he explained. "Angelina's wedding."

"It was yesterday," said Di, looking at him with considerable curiosity. For he had not the appearance of one of those casual, careless people who forget dates or come late. He was a good-looking young fellow, dark, very erect, very neat, and there was about him a remarkable air of cool, composed energy.

"Sorry!" he said. "May I have one of these? Little souvenir..." And stooping, he took a gardenia from the bouquet she carried. For a moment their eyes met; then, with a smile he turned and ran down the steps again and set off along the street at a rapid, easy pace.

"I wonder who *he* was?" thought Di, and forgot him as soon as she got into the car.

She had telephoned that morning to the landlady of the rooming-house where she had spent a horrible month before she had got her job with Angelina, and the landlady had said there was a vacant room she could have, at seven dollars a week. She had highly unpleasant memories of that house, but she did not know where else to go.

"And Mrs. Frick knows me," she thought. "If I went to a strange place, I'd be expected to pay in advance."

The house was downtown in Greenwich Village, but there was nothing Bohemian about it, a dingy old house and very respectable. Mrs. Frick was looking out of the window, and saw Di arrive, in a Rolls-Royce driven by a chauffeur in uniform, and carrying the most expensive sort of flowers.

"Hm—..." said Mrs. Frick to herself.

She opened the front door, with a faint, faint smile, and Connor brought in the trunk.

"Top floor!" said Mrs. Frick.

Connor immediately hated her.

"Is zat so?" he said. "Then you better call a couple o' butlers. Good-bye, Miss Leonard!"

The door banged after him.

"Well," said Mrs. Frick. "*I* haven't got anyone here to take that trunk up all those stairs."

"I'll—find someone," said Di. "Top floor, did you say?"

Mrs. Frick led the way upstairs, three long flights, and opened a door. It was the meanest little room, the chilliest, most depressing little room in the gray light of a February morning.

"I hope I shan't have to stay here long," thought Di.

Mrs. Frick was standing in the doorway.

"There's a clean towel," she said.

"Yes, I see, thank you," said Di, longing to shut the door.

"I told you on the telephone, didn't I?" said Mrs. Frick. "This room is seven dollars a week."

"Yes, you did," said Di.

Mrs. Frick stood there. And, in desperation, Di said what so many other people had said to Mrs. Frick.

"I'm—expecting a check. If you don't mind waiting a few days—"

Mrs. Frick remembered the Rolls-Royce and the chauffeur and was not moved to pity.

"If you'll make a deposit—" she said.

And it was impossible for Di to appeal to her. Her old habit of reserve kept her silent, her sorry experience of life made her expect no kindness and ask for none.

A bell rang downstairs.

"Excuse me a moment!" said Mrs. Frick. "I'll be right back."

As her footsteps died away, Di closed the door quietly, laid the flowers on the bureau and clenched her hands.

"*Think*, you idiot!" she said to herself. "Hurry up! It's your last chance!... I'll tell her she can keep the trunk until I get some money. I couldn't get it away from her, anyhow, without paying someone to move it."

Then Mrs. Frick might want to look in the trunk and would find there some of Angelina's discarded dresses, some photographs, a few books—not a collection likely to appeal to her.

"I'll help with the housework," thought Di. "Make the beds—sweep—anything she wants, until I get a check from Angelina, or a job."

She heard Mrs. Frick coming up the stairs now, and she went out to meet her.

"Mrs. Frick," she began, "I've been—"

"There's a gentleman to see you," said Mrs. Frick. "Your uncle."

"My uncle?"

"That's what he *says*. Your uncle," Mrs. Frick repeated, frigidly.

"But it's a mistake!" said Di.

Mrs. Frick smiled faintly.

"He can't mean me—"

"He asked for Miss Leonard, and I told him," said Mrs. Frick, "that you were just leaving."

"Look here!" said Di.

"I'm sorry," said Mrs. Frick, "but I just remembered I'd promised this room to somebody else. You might try at 280. They sometimes —"

"All right," said Di, briefly, and went past Mrs. Frick, down the stairs. There in the lower hall stood her trunk.

"What can I do with it?" she thought. "If I leave it here, nobody will let me come without paying in advance. And I can't get it moved for a quarter..."

And at that moment she learned a new fact. She saw that shelter was more important than food. If she only had a room, she could have faced hunger with fortitude; it seemed to her that she could even starve without complaining if only she had decent privacy for it.

"There must be places..." she thought, "but I've never heard of them. Perhaps I could ask—a policeman—"

She heard Mrs. Frick coming down behind her, and she moved toward the front door; her hand was on the knob before she remembered that uncle. He was so obviously mistaken that it did not seem worth the trouble to go into the parlor and explain to him that she was the wrong Miss Leonard. She went, only because it meant a little delay in leaving the house.

Opening the door, she found a man in there, a little oddity in a checked suit too large for him, and yellow shoes and a bright tie, a sporting outfit that accorded well with his lean, nutcracker face. He jumped up nimbly and stared at her.

"Well!" he said. "This Diana...? Poor old Harvey's girl..."

She was too much surprised to speak.

"I'm your uncle Peter," he continued. "You'll have heard your father speak of me."

Di colored a little. She had heard her father speak of his family as a unit—"the most contemptible, heartless crew that ever breathed"—remarks like that. She had even heard him mention a brother, but not by the name of "Peter"! He had used other names...

The sporting little man sighed.

"Yes..." he said. "Poor Harvey... Well! When we heard that he'd passed away, we wanted to get in touch with you, but we couldn't find you. Only yesterday we saw in the papers all about the wedding of this Mrs. What's-Her-Name—mentioned a secretary—Miss Diana Leonard. That's poor Harvey's girl, says I, so I telephoned the house half an hour ago and I was told you'd just left, to come here. So...!"

He smiled and she smiled back at him.

"I see you've got your hat on," he said. "In a hurry? No? Well, your Aunt Emma—her idea was—perhaps you'd come to us—act as her secretary, with the usual financial arrangement, y'know. Scientific work, y'know."

"Yes, thank you. I *should* like it very much," said Di.

He seemed a little startled by this very prompt acceptance.

"Well!" he said. "That's excellent! Excellent!... Now, when could you come? Next week?"

"I can come—before that," said Di, a little unsteadily.

"Any day that suits you—"

"I can come—to-day," said Di. "I was just leaving here, anyhow, and I hadn't exactly decided where to go. I—"

"Excellent!" he said, with a quick glance at her. "You wouldn't care to come at once, would you? If you would, I could drive you down. Got my li'l' car outside."

"Yes, I *could*," said Di.

"Excellent," said he. "I'll wait while you pack."

"Everything's packed. I have a bag... My trunk can wait."

She did not care what happened to the trunk. Let Mrs. Frick throw it down the steps into the street; nothing mattered as long as she could get away from here, could have a roof over her head until she had time to breathe.

"If it's not too big I can take it," he said.

"Here it is—in the hall."

"I can manage that!" said he.

Di took up her bag; then she remembered the flowers.

"Just a moment, please!" she said, and ran up the stairs.

On the first landing she almost collided with Mrs. Frick. With a hasty apology she was about to go on up, when Mrs. Frick stopped her.

"Miss Leonard! You're never going off with that man!"

"Yes, I am," said Di. "He's my uncle."

"You said he couldn't be. You said it was a mistake."

"Well, it wasn't, after all."

"Now, see here!" said Mrs. Frick earnestly. "Don't you do it, Miss Leonard! I'm sorry I was so hasty. You just forget what I said and stay on here."

Di was startled and touched by this tone.

"That's awfully nice of you!" she said. "But, you see, I might not get my check for some time, and I might not find a job, either, for weeks. I was—pretty worried. I only have twenty-five cents—"

"Why didn't you *tell* me that?" cried Mrs. Frick.

"No use bothering you about it," said Di. "And anyhow, it's all right now. I'm going to stay with my Aunt and Uncle—"

"Where?"

"I don't know. I didn't think to ask."

"Don't you go!" said Mrs. Frick. "I don't believe he's your uncle?"

"Oh, but he is!" said Di. "He knows all about me and my father… And why on earth should he pretend to be, if he isn't? I'm not exactly an heiress."

"Don't you go!" repeated Mrs. Frick. "You're young. You don't know what people there are in this world."

"But nobody could possibly have any reason—He's taking my trunk now. I hear him."

They both looked over the bannisters and saw the sporting little man handling the trunk with surprising ease.

"Oh, dear!" cried Mrs. Frick. "I don't like this! Stay here—"

"I'm awfully sorry, but you see—"

"Then ring me up!" said Mrs. Frick. "Promise to ring me up as soon as you get there, and give me the address."

"I promise!" said Di.

# Chapter Two.
## Di Breaks a Promise

It was a good car, and this uncle was a good driver.

"And I'm afraid I've got soft," thought Di. "Demoralized. For I really don't care much where I'm going if only I don't have to struggle for a while. Or perhaps I'm just tired."

Whatever it was, she was well content to sit back in the little car, to feel the Spring wind in her face, to look at the streets in the bright morning sun.

"Poor Mrs. Frick!" she thought. "So suspicious... *What* would she have thought of Angelina?"

Her uncle did no talking in the city traffic, but after they were out of that, and headed toward Pelham, he began:

"Your Aunt Emma," he said. "Y'know—very remarkable woman. Very!"

"Is she?" said Di, politely.

"Very!" he assured her. "She's a professor. And a doctor."

"Oh!"

"Psychology," he said. "And so on. It's all too deep for me... But..." He was silent for a time. "Did your father ever tell you anything about her?"

"I think I remember his mentioning her," said Di, who remembered very well that her father had occasionally mentioned a sister who was, he had said, "hard as nails."

"Too bad!" her uncle continued. "But poor old Harvey couldn't seem to hit it off with the rest of us. Always *was* like that. I hope he never said anything to set you against us?"

"Oh, no!" said Di.

"Well..." he said. "I hope you'll be happy now—with your own people."

He spoke kindly enough, yet, she thought, with a curious lack of warmth. An odd little man altogether; looking at him now in the bright sunlight, she saw that his weather-beaten face was deeply

lined with a net of little wrinkles at the corners of his blue eyes.

"Is he old?" she thought. "Or just—battered?" And aloud she asked: "Are you—Father's younger brother?"

"Eh? Yes. Two or three years. Now, I almost hate to ask this—but did you ever hear your father speak of Uncle Rufus?"

"Yes," said Di. "Several times."

"Hm. I'm afraid Harvey didn't care much for the old man."

"I'm afraid he didn't," said Di.

She remembered a letter her father had got from Uncle Rufus, and what he had said about it.

"I simply asked him to make me a little loan," he had cried to his child, "and the damned old skinflint treats me as if I were a beggar!"

He had also spoken of Uncle Rufus quite often as "that damned old hyena."

"Of course," Uncle Peter went on, apologetically, "the old man's got his little weakness... But he's a very remarkable man. Writes books, and so on. Very remarkable!"

"Is he at your house?"

"Not now. But he'll be coming, for a visit. Y'know, I think you'll like him. You're clever, aren't you? Fond of books and so on?"

"I'm fond of books," said Di, "but I'm afraid I'm not clever at all."

"I bet you are!" he said, and added, sadly. "I'm the fool of the family."

She murmured some polite contradiction, and then, to change the subject:

"It was awfully nice of you to look me up," she said. "I really do appreciate it."

"Oh, rats!" said he, cheerfully, and they both laughed.

The countryside was beautiful that April morning, and the girl's spirits rose and rose. She asked so very little of life, expected so very little; a chance of earning a moderate living, and a morning like this were enough. She was not even especially curious. She was going off bag and baggage, with this man she had never set eyes on before, to a house unknown, unknown people, and she had scarcely asked a question. That was her way. Since childhood, she had had to depend

upon her own fortitude, and there was, beneath her half-shy manner, a fine, careless spirit of adventure, an odd little recklessness.

In those days with her father there had been so many disasters.

"I don't know where the money's coming from for the next meal!" he often said.

But it had come. He had often said he was ruined, but somehow they had gone on. And somehow Di, with her patchy education, her one-sided experience, had been able to keep on after she was left alone. No one else had been able to suit the beautiful Angelina, but she had. She had done impossible things; she, who had never had two dollars in her purse, had somehow managed to keep Angelina's chaotic check-book balanced. She, who was so diffident, had been able to talk to the strangest people, to give orders to servants, to confront tradesmen with exorbitant bills.

"I seem to fall on my feet!" she thought. "Look at this! If Uncle Peter hadn't come... But he *did* come!"

He turned the car now up a road so lovely that she gave a cry of delight. It was a road in the very heart of a wood of birches and pines and oaks; only the pines were dark, the other trees, just budding, were exquisitely delicate against the pure, blue sky. There were no houses, nothing to disturb the sun-dappled peace.

"Nice, isn't it?" said Uncle Peter. "Belongs to me... One of these days, I'm going to develop it—cut down most of the trees, and put up some nice little houses—what d'you call 'em?—that stucco, y'know, with timbers—Elizabethan, isn't it?"

It seemed to Di that "developing" was hardly the word for this place, but she said nothing. They were going up a gentle rise now, and as they rounded a curve, she saw before her a very peculiar house, a large, wooden building, lavishly ornamented with little balconies and gables, a forlorn old place, with uncurtained windows, weather-beaten and in great need of paint.

"It's a nice house," said Uncle Peter. "The Swiss style..."

She glanced at him to see if he were laughing, but he looked melancholy.

"It'll have to come down," he said. "Nobody'll buy a place like that, nowadays."

The road led under a portico before the front door; he jumped out nimbly, and held out his hand to assist Di. Then he ran up the steps and knocked at the door, which was opened almost at once by a dismal little man with red hair.

The interior of the house surprised Di. They entered what was obviously a hotel lounge, furnished with wicker chairs and settees, and with a counter at one end, behind which were pigeon-holes for mail. It was all very neat, and quite empty, no clerk at the desk, not a sound to be heard.

"I didn't know..." she began, but her own voice sounded too loud here. She turned to her uncle and found him whispering to the red-haired man. And she could not help hearing what he said.

"Then *eggs*, you damned fool!"

The red-haired man raised his eyebrows sadly, and went off through a door at the right, and Uncle Peter took up her bag.

"This way!" he said, and began to mount the stairs.

"I suppose they run the hotel," thought Di. "But it doesn't seem very popular. Or perhaps this isn't the season."

At the top of the first flight they came upon the usual hotel corridor, long, narrow, red-carpeted.

"Still," she thought, "it'll be rather nice to be in a hotel. More lively..."

Her uncle had stopped, and now turned toward her, with an anxious frown.

"I don't know..." he said. "Maybe I should... Your aunt... Very remarkable woman!"

As he spoke, a door at the end of the corridor opened, and a woman in a surgeon's white overall came out, and behind her, single file, came two children.

"Emma!" said Uncle Peter. "Here she is—"

The woman had stopped, and was looking at him with a sort of steady scorn. Then she turned and pushed the two children gently back into the room they had come out of, closed the door on them,

and advanced to Diana.

"So this is Diana!" she said.

She was a sturdy, solid, little gray-haired woman, very erect, and she was smiling pleasantly now. But Di was incapable of answering at that moment. She had caught a glimpse of those children's faces—pasty, yellowish faces, with blank, dull eyes, and loose mouths, hanging open…

"They're idiots!" she thought, appalled.

"I wish I had known Peter was bringing you to-day," Aunt Emma went on. "We could have made some little preparations. Why didn't you telephone, Peter?"

"Never thought of it…" he muttered, apologetically. "Sorry, Emma."

"I'm afraid it's my fault," said Di, making an effort to speak brightly. "I accepted your kind offer so very quickly."

Aunt Emma held out her hand, and Di took it, felt her fingers caught in a strong grasp. This aunt was shorter than herself, a rather dumpy little woman, with a plain enough face, yet there was something unusual about her, an assurance that was curiously impressive. Her blue eyes were fixed upon the girl's face in candid appraisal; she was studying her, with a disconcerting keenness.

"She's looking right through me," thought Di. "She sees that I've got a safety pin instead of a button in the back of my dress, and that I never remember dates."

"See about lunch, Peter," said Aunt Emma.

"I did, Emma," he said. "I spoke to Wren."

"Then show Diana a room," she said. "You'll understand, Diana, that I'm very busy… Make yourself at home!" And with a pleasant smile she went into the room again and closed the door.

"What does she—do?" Diana asked her uncle, in a whisper.

"Too deep for me!" he answered.

"But—those children—?"

"Don't ask me! I don't understand these things."

"But I mean—" she went on, resolutely, "are they any—relation—?"

"Oh, Lord, no!" he said. "Emma's adopted them, that's all."

He opened a door.

"Here's a room," he said, and hurrying on, opened another door. "And here's one—and here's one. Take your choice! They're all pretty much alike."

So they were; bare hotel bedrooms, close and dusty, with stripped beds.

"Well, this one, thank you!" she said, taking the one furthest from that in which those children were.

"Good!" said he, and hurried off down the corridor.

Di looked about her in dismay.

"I almost wish I hadn't come," she thought. "No, I don't! That's silly. It's a wonderful piece of luck for me. And perhaps more people will come—perhaps there are people here already that I haven't seen."

A considerable noise outside brought her into the hall, and she saw Uncle Peter and the red-haired man bringing her trunk up the stairs. With a praiseworthy, but not very effectual, impulse to help, she stepped back into the room and opened the door wide, back against the wall. And as she stood there, out of sight, another door opened.

"What's all this noise?" demanded Aunt Emma's voice, sternly.

"We're getting up the girl's trunk," said Uncle Peter, in his usual apologetic tone.

"Make less noise!" she said. "You disturb me. You shouldn't have brought the girl like this, without warning me."

"But you told me to make her come!"

"Very well. Now hold your tongue," said Aunt Emma, and her door closed again.

The trunk was now carried past Di and set down, and without so much as a glance at her, Uncle Peter hurried off again. Wren, the little red-haired man, stood wiping his hands on his coat.

"I'll make up the bed for you, Miss," he said. "And air the room, while you're down at lunch."

He was such a subdued little man, so shabby, so forlorn in appearance, that Di suddenly gave him her last quarter.

"Thank you, Miss!" he cried. "I—thank you, Miss!"

Pocketing the coin, he stood before her, as if irresolute.

"I'll bring you towels, Miss," he said. "And if there's anything else you want, there's a bell here, Miss. Better ring several times, Miss, in case I'm not within hearing at the moment... Thank you, Miss."

With his hand on the knob, he added:

"And if you'll excuse me, Miss—I'd advise you to keep your door locked when you're not in the room. Those—little ones is very *mischeevous*. Thank you, Miss!"

He went out, closing the door behind him.

"I certainly shouldn't like those children to get in here," she thought. "I—don't think I like being here, very much."

Then it occurred to her that it would be a matter of considerable difficulty to leave this house now. She had no money for train fare, no money at all.

"Of course if I asked him, Uncle Peter would drive me back to the city, I suppose," she thought. "Only, it would be pretty awkward to say I'd changed my mind. Although they're not very hospitable. 'The girl'—I wonder why they asked me? Out of charity? No; because they couldn't possibly have known how bad things were for me."

The room seemed unbearably close to her; she went to the window and opened it. And there before her were the trees, the dark pines, the old oaks, so close to the house, too close, shutting out all the rest of the world...

Something stirred in her heart, a formless and nameless fear. Wasn't this like a prison?

"What nonsense!" she said to herself. "I'm tired, that's all. It's been a worrying morning. After I've had some lunch—"

There was running water in the room; she washed, and brushed her hair, and then began to unpack her bag.

"There may be other people staying here," she thought. "I hope so. And I must telephone to Mrs. Frick."

She thought of Mrs. Frick with an unreasonable friendliness now. She was impatient to telephone to her.

There was a knock at the door, and opening it, she found Uncle Peter there.

"Lunch, if you're ready," he said.

Since they had reached the house, his manner was undeniably changed; there was a worried, absent-minded air about him now.

"I'm ready," she said. "And, by the way, what's the address here, please? I'd like to telephone it to a friend."

"Well..." he said. "You'd better ask your Aunt Emma."

She stared to him in astonishment.

"I mean—" he said. "She doesn't like her work interfered with."

"But that won't interfere with her work, will it?"

"Better ask her!" he said, and stood aside to let her go down the stairs.

As they passed through the lounge, she turned her head to make sure that she had really seen a telephone on the desk, and she was curiously relieved to see that there was one.

At the end of the lounge were sliding doors, pushed a little open now and revealing a big dining-room. And her heart sank at the sight of it. The tables were drawn up against the walls, and the chairs stacked on top of them; near the window was one small table laid with cloth, and at which Aunt Emma was already seated.

"I suppose the season hasn't begun yet," said Di.

"What season?" asked Aunt Emma.

"I mean—don't more people come here, in the Summer?"

"Nobody comes here unless by my invitation," said Aunt Emma. "This isn't a hotel any longer."

"Just—you and Uncle Peter?"

"That's all."

"It's—" said Di, glancing about the big, empty room. "It seems—such a large place."

"It is a large place," said Aunt Emma.

Silence fell. Presently Wren came in, bringing a remarkably meager and unappetizing lunch, a burnt and curdled little omelette, bread and margarine and tea, and one banana each.

Di thought of past lunches, in Angelina's house; she thought of broiled chicken, rice croquettes, mushrooms, crisp salads.

"I'm spoilt!" she thought. "This will do me good."

At least there was plenty of bread; she ate three slices and drank the black bitter tea, and felt better.

"Aunt Emma," she said. "Do you mind if I just telephone this address to a friend?"

"The telephone is disconnected," said Aunt Emma.

## Chapter Three.
### Di Makes Up Her Mind to Leave

Di was forced to admit that the situation was—uncomfortable. She could not go out anywhere to telephone because she hadn't a penny.

"Well, I can write!" she thought. "There's no such tearing hurry."

And she also made up her mind that she must begin being Aunt Emma's secretary at once, so that she could earn something.

"May I help you this afternoon, Aunt Emma?" she asked.

"We'll see..." said Aunt Emma, with an enigmatic smile. "If you're ready—?"

Di had now eaten everything in sight, and she rose as her aunt pushed back her chair. They went up the stairs together, along the corridor, to the room at the end. Aunt Emma took a key from the pocket of her overall and unlocked the door.

It was a profound relief to the girl that those children were not there. The room looked pleasantly business-like, with a large flat-topped desk, very neat, and a typewriter on a table, and the afternoon sun shining in at the window. Aunt Emma placed a chair before the desk for Di, and seated herself behind the desk, facing her.

"Well!" she said, looking steadily at the girl, "what do you know about cretinism?"

It was remarkably like being at school again, and Di felt the old sensation of defensive resentment.

"Not—very much," she answered.

"How much? What would be your definition of cretinism?"

Di thought very hard.

"Well..." she said. "I think—it has something to do with the—excavations they're making in the island of Crete."

"Good—God!" said Aunt Emma.

She opened the drawer of her desk, took out a cigarette, lit it, and leaning back in her chair, stared at Di.

"A revelation of character," she said. "You're one of those persons who can't say 'I don't know'... Cretinism is a form of idiocy. There are—" She paused, and smoked for a time. "There are," she went on, "a great many varieties of idiocy in this world."

Di grew red.

"The world is largely peopled by idiots," said Aunt Emma. "Of different grades. Most of them attain a development sufficient for the demands of daily life. They can read and write and they can act upon the suggestions of superior minds."

All this time she was steadily regarding Di with a faint smile, and Di began to grow angry.

"I dare say I'm an idiot myself," she said, "but I hope I can be a little useful to you. I can type—"

"Can you read?"

"Read?" Di repeated.

"I mean, are you able to read a book which is not fiction?"

"Yes," said Di.

"Then take this," said Aunt Emma. "It's written by your Uncle Rufus. Kindly read the first chapter and then give me a terse résumé."

Hot and angry, Di took the big volume that was pushed across the desk to her.

*Some Observations Upon the Natural Limitations of National Cultures*, by Rufus Leonard.

She turned the pages, with a somewhat strained air of intellectual interest.

"I suggest that you begin at the beginning," said Aunt Emma. "The first chapter will do for the present."

"I *won't* lose my temper!" said Di to herself. "She has a perfect right to test me before she takes me as a secretary."

She turned to the first page and began to read. But it was like a nightmare; she had to read sentences over and over, to understand them, and even then, the ideas were hazy to her. And all the time she was aware of Aunt Emma smoking and steadily regarding her. She turned a page.

> "One may, for diversion, take a metaphysical view of the problem; one may play with the assumption that the ethos —"

It was no use. She felt that if she had time, and if Aunt Emma were not staring at her, she might manage something, but not in the present circumstances. She closed the book and glanced up, meaning to say that, frankly.

"I see!" said Aunt Emma. "I thought so. No... You are emotional, instead of intellectual. I do not assert that I can read a physiognomy. I consider that a preposterous claim. But give me fifteen minutes' observation of anyone, of the involuntary gestures, the manner of walking, speaking, and so on, and I will know that person better than his own mother would."

Di essayed an uncertain smile.

"I'm awfully sorry I can't help you," she said. "I hoped—"

"You can help me," said Aunt Emma. "You say you can type. I'll give you some work at once."

"Thank you," said Di.

"I shall be glad to have you here," Aunt Emma proceeded. "Your father and I were never in harmony, but your mother was very agreeable. You're very like her."

Di turned her head away quickly. It was almost intolerable to her to hear that name mentioned. All through her lonely and troubled life she had held as her heart's secret the tenderest image of that mother she could not remember. She had virtually needed something to cling to, some ideal, and she had found it there.

There was a considerable silence; when Aunt Emma spoke again, her voice was grave and kindly.

"You remember her at all?"

"No," said Di, very low.

"Your father, no doubt, often talked to you of her."

"No. Never. He—didn't like to talk about—her."

Aunt Emma pushed back her chair, rose, and coming out from behind the desk, laid her hand on the girl's shoulder.

"Work is the panacea," she said. "Now, my dear! Here is a little article of mine which I'd like you to type. 'Basic fallacies of the Montessori Method.' The main fallacy is this. The Signora Montessori imputes to children a capacity for independent action which is so rare, even in adults, as to be remarkable."

She lit another cigarette.

"The immense majority of human beings have no independence," she said. "The suggestibility of the human race has never yet been fully realized. It is my intention to publish some observations in that field before long... And now, there is the typewriter, and here is paper." With her hand on the door knob, she looked back at Di. "Knock on the door if you want to leave the room," she said. "I shall be conducting experiments in the corridor, and a sudden interruption would be very disagreeable." And she went out, closing the door behind her.

Di stood looking at the closed door.

"I—really don't think I can stay here..." she said to herself.

But how was she to get away, without money? The idea of borrowing from her aunt or her uncle was most distasteful, nor could she think of any decent excuse to make for a sudden departure.

"I was so willing to come," she thought. "I can't rush off and hurt their feelings, when they were kind enough to look me up and ask me here. I've just got to make the best of it."

She uncovered the typewriter, and took up her aunt's neat manuscript; it was easy to read, and she finished a page quickly. Then, as she was putting in a new sheet, she heard footsteps outside the door, shuffling up and down the corridor. There was no sound of voices; nothing but those dragging footsteps.

"It's those children!" she thought, and the room grew stifling to her; it was like a prison. She got up in haste, and opened the window, leaned out, breathing with relief the cool Spring air. Then, beneath her, she heard a voice:

"Hello!"

She leaned further out. Directly beneath her was another window, open, and the voice, which was Uncle Peter's, came from the room inside.

"Hello!" he cried again. "What's the matter, Central? Well, try them again."

"But he's telephoning!" she thought. "Then the telephone *can't* be out of order—"

"Hello!" he said again. "Oh! So you're there!... Now, see here, Miles! Your aunt wants you to come out at once... What?... I don't care... No, I can't!... No, I haven't a damned cent... Oh, pawn your watch—do anything you want, but come out here at once, d'you understand?"

Di drew back into the room.

"That's an idea!" she said to herself. "I'd forgotten that watch."

She remembered now a wrist-watch Angelina had given her, an absurd little thing, no larger than a five-dollar gold piece and not much thicker. It had needed expensive repairs to set it working again, and Di had put it away and not given it another thought, until Uncle Peter's words reminded her that it might at least provide a railway fare back to New York.

"And if I just had the money to go," she thought, "If I felt that I *could* go, then I shouldn't mind staying. It's simply this feeling that I can't get away..."

Very well; but how to convert the watch into money? She thought that over for a time, and then, with a sudden inspiration, began to write a letter.

"Dear Mrs. Frick:

"*Here I am, safe and sound. The address is —*" *Here she left a blank, to fill in later.* "*You were so friendly this morning that I feel encouraged to ask you to do me a favor. Enclosed is a little watch. If you could possibly—*" *She hesitated a moment. Mrs. Frick was probably too respectable for pawnshops—*"*manage to sell it for me, and send on the money, I should be very much obliged.*

*"I have already started to work as my aunt's secretary, and I am sure that in a little while everything will be all right. But just at the moment, I am pretty hard up. If you can get me three dollars for the watch, it would be a great help." In spite of her Bohemian upbringing, Di realized that this was an extraordinary letter.*

*"I hope this won't bother you," she added.*

*"Sincerely yours,*
"DIANA LEONARD."

Then she addressed an envelope, put the letter into it, tucked it inside her blouse, and set to work upon her aunt's manuscript with energy.

It was a nice job when she had finished; she was pleased with it. She sighed and stretched and, leaning back in the chair, with her hands behind her head, let her thoughts drift. The sun was going down, the sky was bright and calm... Angelina and her new husband would be at that inn in the Berkshires now. They would probably be having tea.

"I'd like tea myself," she mused. "A *very* large club-sandwich—and coffee éclairs—"

The door opened and Aunt Emma entered.

"Finished?" she said. "That's very nice... Now, my dear, have you a pretty dress with you? Something light... I'm expecting your cousin for dinner."

"What cousin?" asked Di, startled by the news and by the change in her aunt's manner, so kindly and solicitous now.

"Your Uncle Peter's son."

"I didn't know he was married."

"You might have known," said Aunt Emma, with a grim smile. "A man like Peter couldn't help getting married. He's a widower now, though... I think you'll like Miles... Have you a pretty dress?"

"Yes," said Di. "Angelina—Mrs. Herbert—Mrs. Blessington I mean—gave me lots."

Aunt Emma smiled.

"Run along and put one on," she said. "You'll be glad of someone your own age to talk to."

"She *is* nice!" thought Di. "Asking this cousin on my account. Now if only there's a good dinner!"

She dressed, in a green chiffon frock that suited her very well; she took pains to look her best, curiously excited at the prospect of meeting this cousin. Indeed, she was a little surprised by her own emotion.

"Silly!" she thought. "I suppose it's because I haven't any family."

Coming out of her room a little before six, she found Uncle Peter in the hall, lounging against the wall, smoking a cigar. He still wore his jaunty checked suit and brown shoes, but he had a quieter necktie, a more subdued air.

"Hello!" he said. "How nice you look!"

"Oh, thanks!" she said. "Uncle Peter, can you lend me a stamp?"

"Haven't such a thing!" he answered. "But if you have any letters to post, give 'em to me, and I'll look after 'em."

"Thanks! All right!" said Di.

But somehow she did not want to give him her letter to Mrs. Frick.

They went downstairs together, into the lounge. It looked very pleasant there now, with three shaded lamps glowing. Di seated herself in an armchair, by an artificial palm, and Uncle Peter stood beside her with his hands in his pockets, whistling under his breath. And an equable illusion took possession of her. Here she was, in a charming dress, sitting here in the house of her own people; this cousin was coming; nice, interesting things would happen.

"I'm an idiot," she thought, "to imagine there's anything—queer here. It's heartless of me to feel this way about those poor little children. No doubt they're getting the best sort of treatment—perhaps they'll be even cured... No; there's nothing here to be—silly about. It was kind and generous of them to ask me. I'm lucky to be here."

Just then Uncle Peter sighed and stirred, and as she glanced up at him, a singularly disturbing thought came to her. He had been waiting outside her door... Was he guarding her?

The impulse seized her to find out, to make sure if she really were guarded, not permitted to go about alone in this house. And at the same time she was aware of a great reluctance to make this test. Better not. Better let well enough alone…

She sat very still for a few minutes, then she rose.

"I'll just run up and get my handkerchief," she said.

"I'll send Wren," said Uncle Peter.

"He wouldn't know where to find it."

"You can tell him," said Uncle Peter, cheerfully.

"I'd rather go myself," she said, a little unsteadily.

"I'll hop along with you, then," said Uncle Peter. "These lights have a way of going out, and you'd get lost in this barn of a place."

She turned away her head, so that he might not see her face. A panic fear was rising in her; she wanted to get away; she must get away.

"Don't—*bother!*" she cried, and ran toward the stairs. A bad thing, to run. One hears footsteps running behind, one shrinks from the dreaded touch of a hand on the shoulder… She fled up the stairs, darted into her room, slammed the door behind her and locked it, turned on the light and sank into a chair, her hand against her racing heart, and her eyes upon the locked door.

She began to grow a little quieter, her breathing less labored; she was ready to reason with herself, when the light went out.

She sprang up, all her fears redoubled. There was a soft knock at the door.

"I won't answer!" she thought. "I won't—I can't…"

She stood motionless in the dark, staring before her. There was another knock.

"Miss!" came a hissing whisper. "It's Wren, Miss."

"What do you want?" she asked, whispering herself.

"I've got an electric torch here for you, Miss. If you'll open the door—"

She did not answer. She thought if *anything happened*, if she called out for help, who in this house would hear or care? Her panic rose to a climax. And then, in an instant, she mastered it; she drew a

long breath, and crossing the room, unlocked the door.

The light of a torch shone full in her eyes, dazzling her.

"Excuse me, Miss!" whispered Wren, covering the torch and holding out another one. "I thought... If you'll excuse me, Miss. I appreciated your kindness to-day. If there's anything I can do for you, Miss..."

By the light of her torch, she could see his pale face, his anxious eyes; she looked and looked at him, but she could not understand him. Was he honest and well-disposed to her, or was he furtive and treacherous?

"If there's anything I can do, Miss—" he repeated.

She decided to take a chance.

"I wish you'd post a letter for me," she said, with a fair attempt at a casual manner. "I haven't any stamps just now, but—"

"Give it to me please, Miss," he said.

"It's not quite ready. If you'll wait—"

"I'd better not, Miss. If you'll leave it were I can get it—"

"How would one address a letter here?" she asked, quickly, infected by his air of haste.

"The Châlet, Miss. East Hazelwood. Just tell me where I'll find it, Miss."

"Under the bureau-scarf," she began, but he had turned away.

"I'll look after it, Miss," he whispered and was gone.

She stood in the doorway, listening. There was nothing to hear; not a sound of any sort; not a light anywhere except the little beam of the torch she held. But her moment of panic was over; she had herself well in hand; a sort of anger filled her. She went along the corridor, and leaning over the bannister, directed her torch toward the lounge below. And the light fell upon Uncle Peter, stretched out in a wicker chair, smoking his cigar.

"Hello!" he cried. "Who's that?"

"Diana," she answered, and began to descend the stairs.

"I suppose that blamed idiot will have the wit to go down in the cellar and change the fuse," he observed. "I don't understand these things, but Wren does. Poor wiring in the house. I warned you!"

"Well, there's no harm done," she said, affably.

She sat down near him in another chair, and waited.

"I've made a fool of myself," she thought. "Rushing upstairs like that and slamming the door. Uncle Peter was only good-natured. The lights *do* go out. And he didn't come after me. He just sat here, smoking. I don't know what's the matter with me—imagining all sorts of things."

"Hark!" said Uncle Peter.

She started nervously.

"I don't hear anything."

"Car coming," he said, and now she heard it too, coming up the drive. What was coming? Who was coming?

There was a step on the veranda, and then an appallingly loud bang on the front door.

"Lend me your torch," said Uncle Peter, and taking it, crossed the room and opened the door. But he let no one in; he stepped outside, closing it behind him.

She was left now in utter darkness. She heard a murmur of voices outside, and she was groping her way across the lounge to the door, when the lights came on. She hurried then, and looked through the uncurtained glass of the door. A car stood out there and the headlights shone along the drive. And she had a glimpse of two men, carrying between them a limp body; then they passed beyond the stream of light, and she could see them no more.

"This is too much…" she thought. "I can't—"

Her knees were shaking; she sat down again. And presently the front door opened and Uncle Peter re-entered, dapper and cheerful.

"Was there an accident?" she cried.

"Accident?" he repeated, staring at her. "No. What made you think that?"

"I thought I saw…"

"Why, it was just a fellow looking for a room," he said. "You know, this place used to be a hotel, and people still come now and then."

Very cheerful and reassuring, Uncle Peter was. But on his cheek and on his shirt-front were two black smudges. Very like coal-dust. Very like the smudge one might get in a cellar. Smudges such as one might get in going down to turn off the current.

"I'm going," she thought. "I'm going to leave here to-morrow, if I have to walk to New York. Perhaps it's all—imagination—but I—don't like to imagine things like that."

## Chapter Four.
### Di Makes a Promise

No cousin Miles appeared that night. She and Aunt Emma and Uncle Peter sat down to dinner by themselves; a very poor and insufficient dinner, and Wren waited upon them. There was little conversation; Aunt Emma seemed distrait, and directly they had finished she said "good-night" and went upstairs.

"What about a little game of cards?" asked Uncle Peter. "I'll show you how to play Russian Bank, Diana."

She had nothing to read and no desire to spend the evening shut up in her room, so she accepted willingly. But first she went upstairs, filled in the blank in Mrs. Frick's letter with the address, put the tiny watch into the envelope, sealed it and slipped it under a corner of the bureau-scarf. Then she returned to Uncle Peter. They sat in the lounge and played; they were both cheerful and good-humored. But all the time Di was thinking to herself:

"To-morrow evening, I shan't be here. This is the end."

It was not long before Uncle Peter began to yawn, and to become absent-minded, and when Di said she thought she would go to bed, he sprang up with alacrity.

"I like to get up early," he explained. "Like to get out while the dew is on the grass, this time o' year. Used to ride before breakfast, when I had a horse."

He sighed and she glanced at him, baffled. Was he really a simple and kindly man—or wily and evil?

He made no offer to go upstairs with her, but stood at the foot of the stairs until she had reached the top.

"Night!" he called. "Sleep well!"

She locked her door and sat down, with the torch handy. What if he had run down in the cellar and turned out the lights? That might have been nothing but rather a childish retaliation because she had run away.

Very well; that might be that. But what about those two men she had caught a glimpse of carrying another between them?

"I don't know!" she cried to herself. "And I don't care! I'm tired of all this! I'm going away."

Then she remembered the letter, and raised the bureau-scarf. It was gone.

"It doesn't matter," she thought. "I don't care what's happened to it."

She undressed then and got into bed, and fell asleep at once; slept profoundly all night. When she awoke the sun was up, shining into the room, it was a clear, gay morning. But she did not feel gay. On the contrary. Whatever dreams she had had were utterly forgotten, yet some faint, sorrowful impression remained.

She got up reluctantly, went to the nearest bathroom for a cold dip, and dressed.

"I don't know what excuse I can possibly make," she thought. "Or how I can get to New York, or what I'll do there. But I'm going. After I've had some breakfast, I'll be able to think of a way."

Pale, unusually serious, she went down the stairs. And there in the lounge she saw a stranger, a tall, fair-haired young man, sitting stretched out in an armchair, and smoking a cigarette. When he caught sight of her, he rose.

"Good God!" he said, staring at her. "You're not this Diana, are you?"

"That's me!" she answered. "Are you Miles?"

He held out his hand, and when she gave him hers, he kept it in a firm clasp.

"I thought you were going to be repulsive," he said. "I mean, they told me to come out here and meet a cousin who was helping Aunt Emma with her damned work. So I thought horn-rimmed spectacles —*you* know—one of these *nice* girls."

She liked him at once; she felt perfectly at home with him. His young face was a little haggard, his blue eyes looked tired, but there was about him a debonair good humor that immediately attracted her.

"When did you get here?" she asked, trying to pull away her hand.

"This morning," he answered and held her hand still tighter.

A silent struggle ensued, in the course of which she freed herself.

"You must have got up pretty early," she observed.

"Doesn't necessarily follow," he said. "Perhaps I just *stayed* up."

She could believe that; there were unmistakable marks of dissipation in his handsome face, and she was sorry.

"You're not a scientist, are you?" he asked.

"Mercy, no!"

"Then what are you, when you're not here?"

"I was a sort of secretary," she answered, "to Mrs. Herbert—"

"Not Angelina?"

"Yes!" she said, eagerly. "Do you know her?"

"I know the fellow she's just married. Porter Blessington."

He knew these people she knew, and they entered upon one of those absurdly inane yet somehow fascinating conversations: "Do you know so-and-so? Oh, and do you know Mrs. This, or Mrs. That?"

His acquaintance was very large, and Di was able to place him pretty well. She had met other young men like him in Angelina's house, well-dressed, good dancers, remarkably good bridge-players, agreeable and amusing fellows, who get plenty of invitations for dinners, dances and week-ends. But who had no austere scruples. She did not conceive any great respect for her cousin Miles, but she liked him, and it was a pleasure even to hear the names of Angelina's friends, to be reminded of those glittering, hurried days.

"Did you ever meet—?" she was beginning when Aunt Emma appeared. She was wearing a spotless white overall, and white shoes and stockings; everything about her was fresh and neat and of a simple dignity. Her plump face, framed by her short gray hair, was rosy and wholesome, and very kindly in its expression this morning.

"Good-morning, Diana!" she said. "Did you sleep well? We'll have breakfast now, Miles—"

"No, thanks!" he said. "I don't feel much like breakfast."

"Go and take a little walk," said she, and led the way to the dining-room, where she rang for Wren.

"She's evidently seen Miles before this morning," thought Di. "Could it—? Oh, I hope not!"

Could it have been Miles who had been carried into the house last night?

"I'm an early riser," said Aunt Emma. "I've had my breakfast, long ago. But I'll sit with you, and have another cup of coffee... It occurred to me that it might be advisable to talk to you a little about your Uncle Rufus's work. You seemed to find his book—difficult. So I propose to give you an elementary survey."

She lit a cigarette, and leaning back in her chair, began to talk. And then for the first time, Diana began to understand Uncle Peter's description of his sister as a "remarkable woman." All the time the girl was eating, her aunt went on, in her pleasant, assured voice; she never once hesitated for a word, she made of a very dry subject a thing of interest, by her perfect clarity. She had the instinct of the born teacher; she *knew*, without asking, just what needed explaining, what needed emphasizing, just what words to use.

"Now!" she said. "Is it clearer?"

"Much!" said Di, respectfully.

"I suggest," said Aunt Emma, "that you spend the morning looking over your Uncle Rufus's book again. He will appreciate it, if you are able to talk to him intelligently about it."

Di followed her aunt upstairs, with a feeling of remorse. For she did not intend ever to see Uncle Rufus, ever to talk about his boring work, or even to think of it again, once she got away. She took the hateful volume which Aunt Emma handed to her, and sat down alone, at Aunt Emma's desk.

"I shouldn't have let her take all that trouble, explaining," she thought. "The least I can do now is to make an effort. It'll probably do me good."

But she could not keep her mind on the book.

"I need exercise," she thought, "Well, I'll get plenty when I start looking for a job! But I wonder... I wonder if, after all, I hadn't better wait for a day or two, and just see if I get an answer from Mrs. Frick. Then I shouldn't have to borrow any money."

It was Miles who had made this change in her mood. His coming had altered everything; the atmosphere of the house was different now, not lonely and "queer," but cheerful and interesting. She could smile now at her fears of last night. What had happened? Nothing at all!

It was a very, very long morning. Once she opened the door cautiously; the red-carpeted corridor was empty, the sun shining in at the window. She came out, unreasonably nervous, as if she were committing some treachery, and went to her own room. The bed had been made; everything was neat and tranquil. She darted back to Aunt Emma's room, and took up the book once more, with a sigh.

At one o'clock, Uncle Peter knocked at the door.

"Ready for lunch?" he asked.

She was something more than ready; she was very hungry. There had not been one good, solid meal since she had come here. She joined her uncle promptly, and they went toward the stairs. Hearing her aunt's voice below, Di looked down, saw her in the lounge, standing very straight, hands clasped behind her back, a calm, ironic smile on her lips. Before her stood Miles, and the sight of him startled the girl. What was that expression he wore, resentment, shame, bitterness?

"And if you play the fool—" Aunt Emma was saying.

Uncle Peter coughed, and she looked up and saw them. There was no change in her calm, ironic smile, but there was a great change in Miles. As she reached the foot of the stairs, he came toward Di with an eager air of pleasure. And she felt quite sure that the eagerness was forced and insincere.

The lunch was quite as poor as all the other meals she had had here. Aunt Emma was silent, in her somewhat majestic fashion, as if no one here were interesting to her; Uncle Peter was absent-minded, drumming on the table with his fingers. Wren moved about, forlorn and meek as usual. And Miles kept on with that strained cheerfulness. She played up to him as well as she could, because she was sorry for him.

"See here!" he said, abruptly. "Like to take a drive this afternoon, Diana?"

"Oh!" she began, and stopped, glancing toward her aunt. "I'm hoping I can help Aunt Emma—"

"There's nothing of vital importance," said Aunt Emma. "A few hours in the open air will be good for you."

Miles pushed back his chair and rose.

"All right! Get your hat and coat, and I'll bring the car around."

She ran up the stairs, very pleased at the prospect of getting out, and was down again in five minutes. The car was standing before the house, the same car in which Uncle Peter had driven her down.

"You didn't waste any time!" she said.

"I want to get away from this damned house!" he said, vehemently. "Hop in!"

"I'd like to stop somewhere and telephone—"

"All right!" he interrupted. "Get in!"

As soon as she was seated, he started the car with a jerk; before they were out of sight of the house she realized that he was a poor driver, nervous and careless.

"Don't go so fast!" she protested.

He went down the hill and turned the corner in a way that made her gasp.

"I really don't enjoy this!" she said.

"Sorry!" he said, and slowed down a little. "Only, I'm so dam' worried... Lord! You'd think I was a criminal—simply because I'm not much good at business. I'll admit I'm a dud at money-making, but that's no *crime*, is it?"

"Oh, dear!" thought Di. "That's so awfully like poor Father!"

"It's Uncle Rufus's fault," he went on. "He's been hell-bent on making a satisfactory heir out of me. He's made me try all the things that appeal to *him*—wanted me to be a chemist, and then a lawyer—and now it's this business. Never troubled to find out what *I'd* like."

"What would you like to be?" she asked.

"I'll never be anything now—but a failure," said Miles.

Her father had used to talk in that same way, determined to be a failure; taking a sort of bitter pride in it, as if he were revenging himself upon an unworthy universe. And because she had loved her

father, in spite of his weaknesses, she made allowances now for Miles.

"I think people can be pretty much what they want," she said.

"All right!" said Miles. "I want to be a millionaire. Now, while I'm young."

"You'll be young for quite a while longer."

"I'm twenty-seven," he said. "And a rotten failure. There's not one living soul who cares a tinker's dam' about me."

"Your father—" she suggested.

"My father's a—grasshopper!" said Miles.

She tried not to laugh, but her lip trembled with suppressed mirth, and presently he laughed himself.

"Well, haven't you noticed it?" he demanded. "The way he jumps around, so busy, doing nothing. He's like the grasshopper in the fable, too; he hasn't put anything away for the Winter."

"I suppose Aunt Emma's the industrious ant," said Di.

"Not she!" said Miles. "Ants work for the good of the whole crowd, and she doesn't give a hoot for anyone or anything but her own affairs."

"I don't know..." Di protested. "Look at those children—"

"I don't want to look at them," said Miles. "I saw them once, five years ago, and that was enough."

"Five years ago! They must have been babies then—"

"No, they weren't. I never know what size kids are supposed to be, but I should think they were six or seven then. Lord! I came in unexpectedly and there they were, at the table, with Aunt Emma. They were imitating her. Every time she'd lift her spoon, they'd do the same, and slobber the soup, or whatever it was, all down their dresses. It was a beastly sight."

"But don't you think it's a fine thing for her to try and help them?"

"No," said Miles. "Naturally I don't. Not when she's so damned heartless to me. If she can get Uncle Rufus's money, I'll never see a penny of it. Only, I don't think she will get it. She may get on very well with idiots, but she doesn't know how to manage a man. You'll see for yourself to-night—"

"To-night?"

"Didn't they tell you he's coming to-night?"

"No," she answered, startled. She remembered that only this morning she had confidently thought she would never see Uncle Rufus. Last evening she had believed to be her last evening in that house. Yet here she was.

Once more the very unpleasant notion assailed her that she was in a net, entangled there by a hundred invisible threads; as long as she was passive, she could feel herself free, but when she tried to move, the threads tightened.

"Miles!" she said, with a sort of haste. "I want to telephone. Stop somewhere, will you?"

"All right!" he said. "On the way back."

He turned up a lane, and stopped the car by the roadside.

"Uncle Rufus comes out every few months," he said, "to see if anyone's improved enough for him to alter his will. At present, everything's to go to some society he belongs to. He's the world's worst. He hasn't a friend on earth. Of course, the idea is, that you'll make a hit with him—"

"I?"

"He liked your mother," said Miles.

Her heart contracted, at the mention of that name.

"Did you ever see my mother, Miles?" she asked.

"When I was a kid. I don't remember very well, but I think she was like you."

A warm sense of kinship filled her; here was one of her own people, her cousin, who had seen her mother. She turned toward him, eagerly. And was disconcerted to see him taking a flask out of his overcoat pocket.

"Have a spot?" he asked.

"No, thanks," she said.

She did not consider herself responsible for the conduct of other people, she had never imagined herself as anyone's guiding star or guardian angel, and it would have seemed to her only offensive and meddlesome to remonstrate with him. But she was sorry, very sorry.

"You ought to make a hit with the old boy," he said. "Or with anyone. You're the prettiest, sweetest girl I ever saw."

"Ah! You don't know me!" said Di. "Let's get along now, Miles, so that I can telephone."

He took a second drink and then caught her hand.

"Diana!" he said. "The first moment I saw you—"

"Please, Miles, don't spoil everything!" she said, in distress.

Then he grew angry and bitter.

"You're like everyone else," he said. "Simply because I don't make money—"

"All right!" said Di. "Let's not argue now. Let's get along—"

Her self-control, her coolness, increased his anger. He accused her of despising him, of having heard and believed false reports of him from Aunt Emma.

"You won't even listen to me!" he said. "You won't even give me a chance!"

"I can't help listening to you," said Di.

She had been through scenes like this before, with her father. He had used to tell her that she was "heartless," "unnatural," "selfish," then, quite suddenly, he would become remorseful, and tell her she was a "little angel."

"Diana!" he cried, "I've talked like a brute to you. Can you forgive me?"

"Of course!" she said. "Just forget about it."

But that tone did not satisfy him. He wanted something more dramatic, and she was quietly determined to keep to a matter-of-fact good humor.

"Diana!" he said. "I'm just about at the end of my tether. Some day you'll know..."

Her father had used to say: "Some day, when I've gone, you'll realize—"

A sorrowful weariness overcame her. She was so tired of this, so sorry for Miles, his weakness, his fatal self-pity. And she felt that she must bear with him, as he had with her father.

"Diana, you don't know what a rotten time I've had!" he said.

And he told her a great many of his latest troubles. He was in debt up to his ears, his creditors were pressing him, he couldn't find a job worth taking; his health was impaired. She listened with kindly patience, but she could think of nothing helpful to say, only:

"I'm awfully sorry, Miles."

At last he talked himself out, and grew sad and resigned. He started the car and turned home; all the way he was respectful, courteous, almost humble in his anxiety to please her, and she responded good-humoredly, but with an effort. She was glad to see a light in an upper window of The Châlet, glad even to get back there.

He stopped the car, and helped her out, as if she were a princess.

"*Sure* you're not angry, dear?" he asked.

In the dusk his face looked very pale, very young and haggard. She could think now that Miles was a tragic figure.

"Very sure!" she said, and gave his hand a friendly squeeze.

It was not until then that she remembered the telephone-call she had wanted to make.

"Well, to-morrow, then!" she thought, with a sigh. "I wonder if Wren has posted that letter? If he has, I might get an answer to-morrow."

She pushed open the front door and entered the lounge; it was dark in there, not with the blackness of night, but filled with twilight shadows; the willow chairs creaked, as if unseen occupants were stirring uneasily. And she did not like this shadowy, rustling place. A crack of light shone through the sliding-doors into the dining-room and she thought she heard someone moving in there.

"I don't see why I shouldn't go and ask Wren if he's posted the letter," she thought. "There's no reason for all this caution and secrecy."

How did she know there wasn't any reason for it? In this dim silence it was easy to believe that there might be many reasons...

"Oh, nonsense!" she said, aloud, and crossed to the doors. But they would not open. She pushed at them with all her might, filled with a great desire to get into that lighted room. Behind her in the lounge a chair creaked loudly; too loudly; she heard something like a stifled sigh.

"Wren!" she called.

From the dining-room came a distorted echo of her own voice.

"'En! 'En!"

Shambling steps were coming toward the door, in there. She sprang back, groped for a lamp, and pulled the chain. As the light came on, she gave a shaky sigh of relief. Of course there was no one here...

But as she turned her head, she saw, in a corner, a strange huddled little figure, staring at her.

She stared back, speechless. It was a man with a checked cap pulled far down on his forehead, and wearing an overcoat and muffler. He had drawn up two of the wing-chairs before him, so that his corner was a sort of cage, and there he sat staring at her.

"Who—are you?" she asked, unsteadily.

"You must be Diana," he said. "You're very nervous, it seems to me. I'm your father's uncle. You're very nervous. I don't understand that, and I don't like it. You're young; you look healthy. Why should you be nervous—if you have a good conscience?"

"I'm not nervous," she said, briefly.

"You are," he said. "You were in a panic, trying to open that door."

There was something in his voice and manner which roused in the good-tempered Diana an irritability hitherto unknown to her.

"I suppose I felt that there was someone in here," she said. "It's enough to make anyone nervous."

"No, it's not," said he. "When I was your age, nothing could upset my nerves. That was because I was moderate in eating and drinking, and took plenty of exercise. *You* smoke yourself silly with cigarettes and ruin your digestion with cocktails and dance all night—"

"I do not!" said Di, indignantly.

"What do you do, then?"

"It's impossible to answer—a question like that."

"Stand nearer the lamp," he commanded. "Well, you don't look like your father. You're like your mother's people. Good, sound stock. Hm... Like your mother..."

The mention of her mother startled her. Time and again, that name…

"Yes…" he said. "She was a good girl. A kind, good girl. I was fond of her."

She was silent, not able to speak just then.

"She was kind to me," he went on. "Not like the rest of 'em… Come nearer!"

She approached, stood before him, looking down at him. But, in his corner, with his cap pulled over his brow, she could see little of his face.

"I'm alone," he said. "All alone. I'm old, and I'm rich. Everyone wants me to die, so that they can get my money. There isn't a soul in this house who doesn't want to see me dead."

"Oh, no!" she protested, dismayed.

"It's true, my girl," he said, grimly. "Every one of 'em. I come here, from time to time, always looking to see if I can find one trace of the old family virtues. But I never do. They're like a pack of wolves. I keep on coming, because they're the only living relations I have. But I take my precautions!"

She did not quite understand him.

"I don't—" she began.

"I take my precautions!" he repeated. "I don't trust one of 'em. There isn't one of 'em I'd like to meet on the stairs in the dark, if I had any money in my pocket."

"Oh, don't!" she cried, appalled. "Don't think things like that!"

He chuckled, then grew somber.

"See here, my girl!" he said. "I'm going to stay here a week. You be my ally for this week, and you won't regret it."

"I'm ever so sorry," she said, "but I'm afraid—"

"Yes, you will!" he whispered. "You're your mother's daughter. You won't desert an old man. Not *now*. Not *now*. *Don't you feel it?*"

"Feel—what?" she faltered.

"Death," he said. "It's very near."

Her healthy young instinct revolted against this.

"I certainly don't!" she said, sturdily. "I wish you—"

"But you'll stay?" he persisted, still whispering. "You're young. You can spare one week. You'll be well rewarded. One week, that's all."

She hesitated, doubtful and unhappy. The thought of another week in this house was intolerable, yet still more intolerable was the idea of refusing this miserable, futile old creature.

"Miles said he hadn't a friend in the world," she thought. "That's a horrible thing…"

"Your mother was a kind, good girl—" he said.

"All right, I'll stay," she said, quickly.

# Chapter Five.
## Mrs. Frick's Gentleman

It was raining the next morning, and as Di awoke, she lay in bed, looking out at the gray sky, depressed and disheartened as she had never been before in her life.

"Only seven days more!" she told herself. "Perhaps only six—if he counts yesterday. I can certainly stand it for that long."

And then what? To go back to New York and look for a job, probably an ill-paid and uncertain one. She couldn't expect to find another Angelina—and who else would particularly appreciate her amateurish services? She saw herself going from one job to another, always worried about money, growing older and lonelier and shabbier...

"What's the matter with me?" she thought, half-frightened by this mood. "I'm only twenty-three. I needn't begin to despair. Angelina will help me to find something, when she comes back from her honeymoon."

She found it curiously difficult to believe in Angelina just now; above all to believe in Angelina's often-expressed friendship for herself.

"She doesn't really care about me," she thought. "If she did, she couldn't have gone off like that. She's utterly forgotten me by this time. There's no one but Mrs. Frick. And even she probably won't answer my letter."

She sprang out of bed.

"This won't do," she said to herself. "That's like Miles. I *won't* be sorry for myself. I never was before. It's this household. They're not —very cheery."

She put on a dressing-gown and went down to the nearest bathroom for a cold plunge. But even that did not restore her usual debonair courage. The house was so still, there were none of those pleasant early-morning sounds that one hears in other houses;

nothing but the rain driving against the windows. She imagined the meek and miserable Wren, preparing a meager breakfast downstairs…

"I haven't had one decent meal since I got here," she thought.

She tried to dismiss that idea, but without success; she could not banish the memory of the exquisite coffee made by Angelina's French cook, the hot rolls and fresh butter, grilled shad-roe and bacon, or a bit of sole with lemon… On a gray morning like this, there would have been a fire in the dining-room; Angelina, of course, would have been still asleep, and Di alone at the table, with a beautiful breakfast before her. And the whole house filled as usual with that atmosphere of expectation and haste and gayety; the telephone ringing, the maid—

"Perhaps I'll get a letter from Mrs. Frick this morning," thought Di.

Not only did she want the money, but she wanted a letter, a friendly word from Mrs. Frick, from anyone.

She dressed and went downstairs. The lounge was empty; she went into the dining-room, and saw the one little table covered with a coarse white cloth. She crossed to the swing-door by which she had seen Wren pass in and out, pushed it open, found herself in a pantry, went through that and found the kitchen.

Wren was standing at the sink; above him was a window with a broken pane through which the rain was blowing in; at his feet was a litter of tin cans and papers and potato peelings; the room was altogether the dirtiest, most dismal and repellant she had ever seen.

"Good-morning!" she said.

He jumped violently.

"Good-morning, Miss," he said.

"Did you manage to get a chance to post my letter?" she asked.

"Yes, Miss. The night you gave it to me."

"Then perhaps—" she said. "Has the mail come this morning?"

"Yes, Miss."

"Nothing for me?"

"No, Miss."

"Is there another delivery?"

"Yes, Miss, about four o'clock." He looked at her with an anxious smile. "If you'll wait in the lounge—I'll have your breakfast ready in a moment, Miss."

"Oh, thanks!" she said, and returning to the lounge, walked up and down restlessly. It was not appetizing, to contemplate anything from that kitchen. And no letter.

"It'll come in the four o'clock delivery," she told herself.

Then she noticed that the telephone which had stood on the desk was gone.

"Suppose a letter *had* come and I—didn't get it?" she thought.

It was a mistake to think of things like that; she opened the front door and stepped out on the covered porch, with the instinct to seek in the open air a solace for her vague fears and doubts. From the sodden ground, from the woods, came the fresh, cool fragrance of Spring; the sky was gray, but it was not sad out here. She drew in a deep breath, and began to reason with herself.

"I've promised to stay a week," she thought. "And I've got to stop being so morbid and silly. There's nothing—"

"Breakfast, Miss," said Wren, from the doorway.

She went into the dining-room, and tears came to her eyes at the sight of what he had done. There was a clean cloth on the table, and in the center a vase holding two feeble violets; her napkin was folded fan-shape and standing in a glass; there was a half-orange, carefully cut, in a chipped saucer.

"How nice!" she cried. "How—pretty everything looks! How—nice!"

His dismal face brightened.

"Thank you, Miss!" he said. "It's a pleasure to do anything at all for you, Miss."

Just as she had finished, Aunt Emma appeared.

"Do you care to work a little this morning?" she asked, dryly.

"Glad to!" said Diana, and they went upstairs together.

"Can you take dictation?" asked Aunt Emma.

"Not in shorthand. But I can manage pretty well in longhand, if you don't go too fast."

"I shan't go too fast," said Aunt Emma, with a chilly smile.

She was not over-friendly this morning; indeed, the girl perceived in her something that would have been irritability in one less self-controlled. She lit a cigarette and began to dictate, slowly, with long pauses. Her subject was "suggestibility" and her theory was unpleasant. She spoke of the "average" human being, and Di felt completely average herself. This average human being, said Aunt Emma, does not act from instinct, as is popularly believed.

"His actions," said Aunt Emma, "are almost always the result of suggestion from a superior mind. He will, under the influence of suggestion, act in a manner directly opposed to his natural instinct. This was very noticeable during the late War, when the normal instinct of self-preservation was entirely overcome by the insistent suggestion of the leaders in various countries."

"But," said Di, "perhaps war's just another instinct. Animals fight —"

"An animal—" said Aunt Emma, "fights to defend itself or to remove a rival. I have not yet seen an animal fighting for the convenience of another animal. To continue: The profound instinct of woman for maternity is diverted, and in many cases, perverted, by the suggestion—"

She went on, tranquilly analyzing the utter idiocy and helplessness of that average human being.

"By a proper use of suggestion," she said, "a superior mind can, with very little effort, exercise complete dominance over an unlimited number of average minds."

"Do you mean—" said Di, apologetically, "that you can make other people do things—?"

"I can," said Aunt Emma, "I do."

"Not me!" thought Di.

"Yes!" said Aunt Emma, as if the girl had spoken aloud. "You too."

"Please just try! I do want to see how you do it!"

"My dear child," said Aunt Emma, "naturally it is essential that you should not know what I want you to do. You must always be persuaded to imagine that you are acting in your own best interests."

"Have you been making me do things since I've been here?"

"But what should I particularly want you to do?" said Aunt Emma, blandly. "I hadn't considered my words as having any personal applications. They are merely notes, to be worked later into a little article."

Diana said no more, and they worked together until lunch time. No one else appeared at the table but Di and Aunt Emma, but when they had finished, and went into the lounge, Uncle Rufus was coming slowly down the stairs. He was still wearing the checked cap, the overcoat and muffler.

"Good-morning!" said Di. "Are you going out?"

"No!" he said, so sharply as to startle her. "I want to speak to you, when your aunt is out of the way."

Aunt Emma paid no attention to this; she lit a cigarette, and went over to the door and opened it. A current of cool, sweet air blew in, stirring her gray hair.

"The rain is over," she remarked, and stood there, smoking in calm satisfaction, until her cigarette was finished.

"Do you want me to go on, Aunt Emma?" asked Di.

"*I* want you here!" said Uncle Rufus.

"*Je vous en fais cadeau*," said Aunt Emma, almost gayly, and went up the stairs.

Uncle Rufus settled himself back in his chair.

"Now, see here, my girl!" he began. "Come nearer! There! Now I want you to know that it'll be well worth your while to look after me."

"I wish you wouldn't talk like that!" she protested. "I'll be glad to keep you company, but I don't *want* anything for it."

He leaned forward and stared at her. She had not yet had a good look at his face, and even now she saw only his piercing eyes under bushy eyebrows.

"I can't believe that!" he said.

"Please don't mind my saying it—but don't you think it's a mistake to be so—suspicious?"

He gave a thin, little laugh.

"Suspicious?" he said. "Look here! Put your hand on this cap."

She touched it, and found it stuffed with some sort of wadding. Then he began to unwind his muffler, the length of which surprised her; it went round his neck three times.

"See?" he said.

"But I don't—"

"Hard for anyone to choke me with this on," he said, re-winding the muffler about his neck. "And this cap would considerably deaden the force of a blow on the head."

"Oh! You're mistaken!" she cried. "Nobody—"

"You don't know 'em," said he. "And I do. I always carry a good bit of money with me, in case I should suddenly fall ill. Might not be able to speak—but my money'd speak for me. I shouldn't be carted off to die in a public ward with *that* in my pocket. So far, my loving family here have been considerate because they're hoping I'll change my will and leave 'em something. But if ever they felt *sure* I wouldn't do that, then they'd get rid of me, for the sake of what's in my pocket."

"But if you think such horrible things, why do you come here?"

"I'm old," he said. "I haven't anyone. When I was young, I didn't care. I didn't want anyone. But now I'm old. I need someone!" He caught her sleeve. "I want to trust someone!" he cried. "And I can't! If I could trust *you*—if I thought you'd stand by me—I'd leave it all to you! All that money!"

"But I don't want it, Uncle Rufus," she began, when he collapsed, sank down in his chair as if she had dealt him a cruel blow.

"Don't—want it!" he whispered. "All that money…?"

"I didn't mean to be rude or ungrateful," she said, hastily. "It's very kind of you. I do appreciate it. Only, I mean—you don't have to offer me that. I'll be glad to do what I can for you without—that."

"No," he said. "Nobody gives something for nothing."

"Lots of people do. Haven't you ever met any—ordinary people, who were just kind and decent?"

"Nobody's kind and decent," said Uncle Rufus.

She fell silent after that, sitting near him, lost in her own thoughts.

"It's a sort of insanity," she thought, "to feel as he does. How horrible! How pitiful!"

She glanced at him, saw him with his chin sunk on his chest, a grotesque bundle of clothes.

"I wonder why he cares," she reflected. "If I thought the world was like that, I'd be obliged to anyone for putting me out of it."

The loud twittering of a sparrow made her turn to the window; the sun had come out now, warm and bright.

"Wouldn't you like to come out and get some fresh air?" she asked, but he did not answer.

She was longing herself to get out into that gay world, where the rain drops glittered and the sparrows chirped.

"I haven't had any exercise since I came here," she observed, apologetically.

Still he did not answer, and drawing nearer, she stooped and looked at him. Under the shadow of the cap-brim, she saw that his eyes were closed. She opened the front door again and went out on the porch, sat down on the built-in bench there, with a sigh.

"I wonder where Miles is!" she thought. "This would be such a perfect afternoon for a walk. And Uncle Peter—"

"Miss!" whispered a voice behind her, and turning, she saw Wren standing on the grass below the porch.

"Miss!" he said, glancing nervously over his shoulder. "There's a gentleman to see you!"

"A gentleman?"

"Excuse me, Miss, but—" He glanced significantly at the open door.

"Where is he?"

"He's just down the hill, Miss. There's a clearing there, and I thought—perhaps you'd prefer to speak to him there."

"But who is he?" she asked, very much interested.

"He didn't mention his name, Miss. I saw him coming up the hill, and I stepped out, to tell him he was on private property, and he said he was coming to see you, Miss. So I—said I'd fetch you."

"But nobody knows I'm here."

"Excuse me, Miss, but didn't you write a letter?"

Could Mrs. Frick have sent someone, in answer to that letter?

"Excuse me, Miss!" said Wren, in a trembling voice. "Why don't you *go*, Miss? At once?"

She looked at him in surprise, and the thought occurred to her that he was curiously anxious for her to go meet this stranger.

"Lord!" she said to herself, impatiently. "I'm getting as bad as Uncle Rufus. What does it matter who he is or what he wants? It's broad daylight, and I'm capable of looking after myself."

So she rose.

"I'll go and see what he wants," she said. "Thank you, Wren."

She set off in the direction Wren had indicated, round the side of the house to where a faint path began, among the trees. The ground was still sodden, but the sun was warm; she went leisurely, partly because she was happy to be out alone on this sweet Spring day, and partly because she felt half-ashamed of her eagerness to see Mrs. Frick's gentleman. Any message, any contact with the world outside The Châlet was so welcome to her.

Halfway down the hill she perceived the pleasant aroma of a pipe; she went almost noiselessly over the ground carpeted with leaf-mould and pine-needles, and she had a chance to observe the stranger before he saw her.

Only, he wasn't a stranger; she had seen that neat, dark young man somewhere before. She stared at him with a frown. He was sitting on a fallen log, in a little clearing, smoking a pipe, and he was quieter than anyone else she had ever noticed. His lean, sunburnt hands rested on his knees, his swarthy, handsome face was impassive, yet, in his immobility, he was conveying an odd impression of alertness.

"Where have I seen him—?" she thought.

He glanced up then; he could not possibly see her through the trees, yet he was looking directly at her. He rose to his feet and waited, as she came on down the steep hillside.

"Good-afternoon," he said, in a stiff, unsmiling way.

"Good-afternoon," she answered, and waited for him to go on. But he turned away to knock out his pipe.

"Very kind of you to come," he said. "I'm sorry to trouble you, but your man advised me not to go up to the house."

She fancied from his stiff and correct manner, that he disapproved of this, and she answered, with dignity.

"Yes. They're—all resting…"

"I see!" he said, and suddenly his dark face was lighted by a singularly vivid smile.

"I know!" she cried. "I knew I'd seen you! It was outside Angelina's house—Mrs. Herbert's house—the day I left!"

He brought out a card from his pocket and handed it to her.

"Mr. James Fennel."

"You know Angelina, don't you?" she went on, very pleased. "I remember you said—"

"Er—yes," he said.

"Have you heard from her?"

"No," he said, briefly. "I haven't."

"How did she know where I was?"

"I don't suppose she does know," he answered, with an unmistakable air of annoyance.

Di looked at him, startled and a little angry at his manner.

"Then how did you happen to come?" she asked.

"Mrs. Frick sent me—with a note," he said, and from his waistcoat pocket took out an envelope.

"But I don't see—!" she cried, more and more surprised.

The envelope was certainly addressed to herself; she turned it over, as if seeking for mystic information. And he volunteered no information whatever, only stood there, very erect, like a soldier at attention.

"It's very nice of you—" she said, dubiously.

"Oh, not at all!" said he.

There was a considerable silence.

"Well, thank you!" she said. "I won't keep you—"

"Wait a moment, please!" he interrupted. "Mrs. Frick had some idea that things were not altogether pleasant for you here. She—if they're not... There's a train at 5.08."

She could only stare at him.

"If you'd care to take that train," he said. "I'll come up to the house with you, and wait while you pack."

"But—thanks ever so much," she said, "but I've promised my uncle I'd stay the week out."

"Look here!" said Fennel. "You look—rotten. Tell them I've brought an urgent message—"

"I'd be ashamed to do that," she said. "I promised to stay, and I'll have to. But—"

"But you're unhappy here," he said. "And you're worried."

"I am—a little," she admitted. "But I think it's nothing but—nerves. Nothing could possibly happen to me—"

"Don't say that," he interrupted, curtly. "You don't know!"

"But who on earth would want to interfere with me? I haven't a penny and I don't know any secrets. I'm absolutely unimportant."

"You're not!" said Fennel.

She looked at him; their eyes met, and she smiled, her nonchalant and doubtful little smile. Not yet in her life she had been of supreme importance to anyone. People had liked her and had often been kind to her; she had no grudge against the world. But she had never counted for much. Her father no doubt had loved her, and had made her childhood a sorry and anxious time and had died making no provision for her. Angelina had been fond of her and had gone off and forgotten her. She was not even very important to herself; she didn't care much what happened.

She stood where the sun shone on her bare head, still with that little careless smile. But he did not smile at all; he looked at her with a sort of cold anger.

"I've come—" he said, when a sound from above made her turn.

"It's Uncle Rufus!" she cried.

The old man was scrambling down the hill-side, a ridiculous figure in his voluminous overcoat and the cap pulled over his eyes; he slipped and stumbled as he came, and clutched at the trees for support.

Diana ran to help him.

"Uncle Rufus!" she said, "I didn't—"

He struck out at her blindly.

"No!" he cried. "No! You've betrayed me! you're false and lying like the rest—"

"Look here!" interposed Fennel.

"Hold your tongue!" cried the old man. "And get out!"

He stood with his arm about a tree, breathing fast, glaring at them both with savage malignancy.

"I went to sleep," he said to Di, "because I trusted you."

"But I only went out for a moment, Uncle Rufus," she said, so pitying him for his futile and distorted anger, more futile than ever out here, under the Spring sky. "There's no harm done. Let's—"

"I was asleep—and helpless!" he said. "I trusted you—and you ran away. Ran out to meet your sweetheart—like a little servant-wench —"

"Look here!" said Fennel again.

The old man turned on him with a snarl. He tried to speak but no words came. He lifted his arm, as if to hurl a curse, and lurched forward, tottered a few steps, and fell forward on his face. He lay as still as if he were a bundle of rags.

# Chapter Six.
## A Disappearance

Fennel went down on his knees, turned the old man over, unbuttoned his overcoat, jacket and waistcoat and felt his heart.

"Is he dead?" asked Diana, in a whisper.

"No..." said Fennel. "But—" He hesitated. "We'd better get him up to the house as soon as possible."

"We can carry him. I'll help you."

"No," said Fennel. "If you'll go on ahead, and see that things are ready for him—and send someone back—"

She set off at once scrambling up the steep hillside, ran across the grass to the house and flung open the front door.

"Wren!" she panted.

There was no answer, and she ran through the dining-room to the kitchen, where she found Wren peeling potatoes.

"There's been—an accident!" she said, breathlessly. "Old Mr. Leonard—down there in the wood. Please go and help to carry him up to the house."

Wren gave her a sidelong glance, like a frightened horse and bolted out of the room. She waited for a moment to get her breath and then hastened up the stairs to tell her aunt. She met Wren coming down.

"I'm going, Miss!" he assured her, anxiously.

At the end of the corridor she saw her aunt come out of her room, and lock the door behind her.

"Uncle Rufus—" the girl began.

"What man was that with you?" Aunt Emma interrupted.

Diana was a little startled.

"Fennel, his name is," she said briefly. "Now what can I do?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said her aunt, and went past her, down the stairs. As Diana followed her, Uncle Peter came tearing down, in his hat and overcoat, and darted out of the door, slamming it behind him.

Aunt Emma went over to the window, and, lighting a cigarette, stood there looking out.

"Can I—get his room ready—or something?" asked Di.

"And how do you propose to get his room 'ready?'" asked her aunt. "It's been swept and dusted and the bed made. Did you contemplate decorating it with flowers?"

"I only wanted to do something—" Di began, reddening a little under that contemptuous tone.

"You've done quite enough, I should say," observed Aunt Emma. "Ah! There they are! Now go and open the door, and look zealous."

Over the top of the hill came Fennel and Wren, carrying the limp figure of the old man between them; they crossed the lawn and entered the lounge.

"Upstairs," said Aunt Emma, exactly as if she were speaking to furniture-movers.

Just then a car shot past the house, and Di saw that Uncle Peter was driving it. Aunt Emma turned away, leisurely extinguished her cigarette, and went upstairs. And Di, feeling entirely superfluous, followed her again.

Fennel and Wren were just laying the old man on his bed.

"Thank you!" said Aunt Emma. "Wren, go down and put on a kettle of water to boil."

Wren sidled out of the room at once, but Fennel stood at the bedside looking down at the old man.

"Mr. Fennel," said Aunt Emma, very amiably, "I don't like to impose on you—but our telephone is out of order, my brother has gone to fetch a doctor, and I'll need Wren here. If you'd be kind enough to go to the drug-store and get a prescription made up—tell them to send it up at once... It's on your way to the station, so perhaps it's not asking too much—"

"Not at all," said Fennel, briefly.

Aunt Emma sat down and taking a fountain pen and a note-book from her overall pocket, wrote briskly for a moment.

"Now!" she said. "And if you'll be kind enough to take this as quickly as you can… Diana! You know where the linen-room is? Run and get me four clean towels… Hurry!"

Di hastened out of the room and along the corridor. But before she reached the linen-room, she heard Fennel coming after her. She stopped.

"Please come again!" she said. "I haven't had time to thank you properly—"

He came close to her.

"See here!" he said. "I'll be waiting for you in that same place in that wood—at nine this evening. I'll wait an hour, and if you don't come, then I'll come here to the house for you."

"Well… no, thanks," she said, surprised. "You see, with Uncle Rufus ill, I can't—"

"Stand out of the way!" said Aunt Emma's voice, so close that she started. "I'll get the towels myself, if you're not going to help me."

"Good afternoon!" said Fennel, curtly, and without another word or glance, went off down the stairs.

Di opened the door of the linen-room and got down the towels from a shelf.

"Now!" said Aunt Emma, "if you're willing to be of any assistance —when there's no male spectator to appreciate it—"

"This isn't the time to answer," thought Di. "I've got to put myself aside when Uncle Rufus is so ill." And aloud: "What can I do?" she asked, cheerfully.

"You can go into my room," said Aunt Emma, "and type the short article that you'll find on the desk there. It must be posted to the *Medical Journal* to-night."

Then there came to Di a very definite suspicion that her aunt wanted only to get her out of the way. She had sent her brother off in the car, Wren downstairs to the kitchen, Fennel on an errand… Fear crept up in her heart like an icy tide.

"Good God!" cried Aunt Emma. "Can't you do *anything*?"

"I'd—like to—stay with Uncle Rufus," said Di, in an unsteady voice.

For she had abandoned him once, and then great disaster had happened. And she would not abandon him again. She had promised to stand by him.

For a moment Aunt Emma looked at her, with her blue eyes like ice. Then she laughed.

"Very well!" she said. "And perhaps you'd like to taste any medicine I give him? Come along!"

They re-entered the room where the old man lay on the bed, motionless, still in his grotesque cap pulled down to his ears, and his overcoat.

"Sit down over there, out of the way," said Aunt Emma. "I'm going to get some medicine."

When she had left the room, it seemed to Di that the window might be opened a little. And as she did so, she saw on the drive beneath, Fennel, talking to Wren.

She could hear their words plainly.

"It's for their own good, sir," Wren was saying, earnestly. "There's so much harm they could come to, if they was to get out. I know, sir, it *does* give one a shock to see them looking out of the window like that—but it's for their own good."

"There was a friend of mine, a doctor in Switzerland," said Fennel. "He had some cases like that in his sanitarium. Cretins, aren't they?"

"Yes, sir."

"He kept them out in the air, as much as possible—"

"Did that help them, sir?" Wren interrupted.

"I should think it would help anyone," said Fennel. "But of course he gave them some sort of treatment. Thyroid extract—"

"Thyroid extract, sir? Did that do them good?"

"I believe so. Some of them improved—grew taller, you know, and could talk better. But isn't your Miss Leonard a physician? No doubt she—"

"Would you mind spelling that, if you please, sir? That extract you mentioned?"

Fennel did so, and Wren repeated it after him.

"Do you think it can be bought, sir—?" he began, when Aunt Emma came out of the kitchen door.

"Wren!" she said.

The little man fairly cringed.

"I was just waiting for the kettle to boil, Miss—I—"

"Get in the house," she said, carelessly, and he disappeared at once.

Then she and Fennel looked at each other. Diana waited, with unaccountable dread, for what they would say. But they said nothing. Fennel took off his hat, and with that vivid smile of his, turned away, went off down the hill.

Di closed the window noiselessly, and sat down on a chair at the other side of the room.

"What does it *mean*?" she asked herself. "What does it *mean*?"

For she was absolutely certain that beneath all the things she could see and hear there was something else, some meaning she could not grasp. It was as if she were watching a play in a foreign language; she could see the actors, watch their gestures, their entrances and exits, hear their words, but never seize the significance. She did not even know who was the villain of the piece, or who the hero.

Fennel... Was he cast for a minor part; had he just "walked on" in this one scene and now was gone, not to appear again? A curious feeling of regret seized her, almost of desolation, because he was gone. She was left alone here with Uncle Rufus; she was his ally, pledged to stand by him, but was he *her* ally? She could believe that there in the wood, in his last conscious moment, he had positively hated her.

She rose, and went over to the bed to look at him. But she turned away hastily; he was so grotesque, so horrible, lying there in his overcoat and cap, his eyes closed, an expression of bitter malice on his sallow old face. She pitied him, that man who had grown old without a friend, she was willing and determined to help him, but she could not feel any affection.

"Is he—very ill?" she wondered. "Dangerously ill? It seems to me that Aunt Emma's doing precious little for him... But of course I don't know. Perhaps there's nothing that *can* be done. She ought to know. And Mr. Fennel seemed satisfied. If he'd thought there was anything—queer, I don't believe he'd have gone away without a word... But he wanted to see me this evening... He certainly wasn't thinking of a lover's tryst. Perhaps he had something to tell me—something I ought to know. It was a mistake to say I wouldn't go. I'm sorry I said I wouldn't."

That reminded her of the letter he had brought from Mrs. Frick, and taking it out of her pocket she tore it open. Folded inside the letter she caught a glimpse of green, and drew out a ten-dollar bill.

Ten dollars! Freedom and independence! She could get away from here, buy a railway ticket, pay a week's rent for a room, and look for a job. And it seemed to her that any job on earth would be joyous and delightful after this. Any job, where she was free to come and go, where there were people to talk to, an ordinary existence. She was about to read the letter when the sound of a car outside sent her to the window again, and she saw Uncle Peter, driving the roadster, and wedged in beside him, two portly, middle-aged men. Such respectable, such blessedly *ordinary* looking men! The thought of them coming into this house filled her with immense relief. They were coming, and she had ten dollars. At the end of this promised week she would go...

Aunt Emma entered the room.

"They're here!" she said. "Run down and tell Wren to come up at once. We'll have to make the patient a little more presentable for Doctor Coat."

"Oh! Is one of them a doctor?" asked Di, better pleased than ever. Then there couldn't be anything really—queer.

"Don't stop in the lounge to speak to them," said Aunt Emma. "And you'd better not come back, just yet. Wait in the kitchen until I come."

But Di felt that no human power should keep her from speaking to those blessedly ordinary men.

"Why don't you want me to speak to them?" she asked briefly.

Aunt Emma looked at her.

"I suppose," she said, "that you meant to trip in, like a little ingénue in a play, all curls and dimples and they would be enchanted. But in the first place, they're here on business, and they've never heard of you. And in the second place, you're not looking quite your best. You might take a glance in the mirror."

"No, thanks," said Di, turning scarlet.

"Then please send Wren at once."

She went downstairs, and hurried through the lounge without turning her head, traversed the dining-room and entered the kitchen. There sat Wren, with his head down on the table, a forlorn little figure.

At the sound of her step, he jumped up.

"Miss Leonard wants you right away," said Di.

"Yes, Miss!" he answered.

Then, glancing nervously over his shoulder, he came nearer to her.

"Miss!" he whispered. "If you'll kindly not mention this…" And he thrust a piece of paper into her hand and hurried out of the room.

With considerable curiosity, she opened the scrap of paper, to see what Wren wanted to say to her.

"Nine o'clock. J.F."

That was not a message from Wren. Putting the paper into her pocket, she crossed the kitchen and opened the door, stood there to enjoy the clear air and to think. The sun was going down. The sky was tranquil; in the trees the birds were chirping their evensong.

"I *will* go!" she thought. "He wouldn't ask me if it wasn't important. He's—trustworthy."

It was so great a comfort to feel that, after all, he hadn't walked off, was not gone; she looked forward with eagerness, with impatience, to seeing him, hearing his cool, unemotional voice. Nothing would confuse him, ever, nothing could deceive him, his quiet dark eyes would see, would judge, would understand—

"How idiotic!" she said to herself. "I don't know the man. I never spoke to him before to-day. I don't even know why he brought Mrs. Frick's letter."

It occurred to her that the letter might contain some explanation of Fennel. She felt in her pocket for it. The ten-dollar bill was there, and the note Wren had just given her, but Mrs. Frick's letter was gone.

"I must have dropped it up in Uncle Rufus's room," she thought, very much distressed. "Well, I certainly can't go to look for it now. I'll have to wait."

This was a singularly unpleasing idea, for she was morally certain that Aunt Emma would read the letter if she saw it.

"She'd do anything she wanted to do," thought Di.

Just then she caught sight of a figure breasting the hill, outlined clearly against the pale, clear sky. It was Miles, handsome and debonair and cheerful, carrying under his arm a package wrapped in blue paper. He caught sight of her and waved, and she waved back again.

"Hello, dear!" he said, as he came nearer.

That was an unpromising beginning, but she answered amiably.

"Hello, Miles!"

He came into the kitchen and handed her the package he carried.

"Present for you!" he said.

"Thank you, Miles!" she said. "But first I'd better tell you... There's bad news. Poor Uncle Rufus—"

"There couldn't be any news bad enough about *him*," said Miles.

"No, seriously, Miles, he's very ill."

"Stuff! He's always getting 'very ill!'"

"No, but this time... He came down to that little clearing in the wood after us, and he had some sort of attack. We thought he was dead—"

"Who's 'we'?" asked Miles.

She saw that she had made a mistake, but she was not going to be intimidated by Miles.

"A Mr. Fennel and I—"

"Who's Mr. Fennel?"

"A friend of mine."

"Look here!" said Miles.

And then it began, that scene she dreaded.

"You might have told me there was another fellow, and not let me make a fool of myself, thinking of you all day in the city... bringing you a present."

"Don't be silly!" she said firmly. "You can't imagine that I've lived for twenty-three years and never made any friends. Let's see the present! I love presents!"

But he snatched the box away.

"You needn't be so dam' patronizing!" he said. "I'm not a child."

"You're acting like one," she said. "Oh, Miles! Don't let's quarrel! I'm so—so tired..."

"What about *me*?" he interrupted. "Why, the night I came here, I was so sick I had to be carried into the house."

"Oh, was that you?" she cried, relieved; but added hastily, "I'm awfully sorry you were sick, what was it?"

"You know dam' well!" he said. "They've told you. It was bootleg whisky. It's killing me."

As if in a nightmare, she knew what would come next. He would now go on to say, with considerable profanity, that no one else cared what happened to him, so why should *he* care? Just as her father had used to do, with that same perverse insistence upon his unique unhappiness. That, just as she had never known how to manage her father, she could not now manage Miles. She was not a managing sort of girl: she had no desire to rule, or to influence; she was only ready to help as best she could.

"Miles...?" she said, with that dubious little smile. "Sit down and light a cigarette. It's good for the nerves."

For answer he slammed the box on the floor and set his heel on it, trampled on it until the wrapping and the box inside were burst, and she could see a beautiful assortment of chocolates being mashed. And she, who had in her time endured so much, and with such fortitude, began to cry.

Miles looked at her, astounded.

"I didn't mean—"

"No!" she cried. "When you hurt people—you never expect them to *be* hurt..."

"Diana!" he said, really alarmed by her tears. "Diana... I'm sorry... I'll get you another box..."

"It's not *that*!" she said. "It's just everything..."

He came to her side, and took her hand, almost timidly.

"I didn't mean to act like this!" he said, miserably. "I'd been thinking of you all day—and looking forward so to seeing you when I got back. You poor little kid! I meant to be—different. Diana, please give me another chance! *One* more chance! I'll take hold of myself, dear! I have tried to be different since I met you. I haven't touched a drop since that night. Say you'll—"

"Diana!" said Aunt Emma's voice. "Will you be kind enough to cook the dinner?"

Di glanced up, so startled that she forgot the tears still wet on her cheeks.

"Wren will have to sit with your Uncle Rufus," said Aunt Emma. "He won't have anyone else with him; he won't even see Doctor Coat. So I'll have to ask you to help me out. There'll be the Doctor and Mr. Purvis and your Uncle Peter and Miles and you and I—six of us. Just a simple dinner, naturally."

"But—I'm awfully sorry—" said Di, "but—I'm afraid I don't know —"

"Very well!" said Aunt Emma. "Then, Miles, you and your father will have to cook the best sort of dinner you can. Perhaps Diana will be able to turn on the light in the dining-room and put the chairs at the table."

"She and I will get your dinner," said Miles. "There's nothing Diana can't do, when she puts her mind on it."

Aunt Emma turned, and walked off, erect and composed, and Miles went to Diana and put his arm about her shoulders. She sighed to herself, wondering what new mood this signified, but

glancing up, she saw in his face a look that profoundly touched her, a sort of despairing appeal.

"Di," he said, "if I could always be with you... I—I don't *mean* to be—like I am... If you loved me—we could go away from this dam' place... I haven't any money, or any brains, or any character, but if I had you, I'd get them all. If you cared—"

"Miles," she said. "I *do* care. I've liked you ever since I first saw you."

"But not my way," he said.

She did not answer. He bent and kissed the top of her head, and moved away.

"Let's cook?" he suggested.

"You see," Diana explained, "Father and I never exactly did any housekeeping. He liked to eat in restaurants."

"I've never had a home in my life," said Miles. "So between us we might be able to manage something pretty original."

He glanced about him, then, taking the lid of a saucepan, he shoveled up the mess of chocolates and threw it into a pail. He made no more apologies, no more complaints; he only tried to help.

The larder was disconcertingly bare. They found one tin of soup which they diluted lavishly with water; they found a slab of bacon and six eggs, and a large vegetable which baffled them.

"I think it's a turnip," said Di. "Anyhow I'm sure it's a tuber; I'm going to treat it like a potato and peel it and boil it."

"Those bananas—" said Miles. "They seem pretty crude... Can't we make some tasty little what-not out of them! Mash them?"

His good-humor, his willingness, made the preparation of that dinner the pleasantest hour Di had spent in a long time. She was so immensely glad to laugh again. She forgot, for that hour, all her anxieties, she even forgot poor Uncle Rufus.

"Now!" she said, at last. "I think we've done all the harm we can. If you'll please start setting the table while I dart upstairs and brush my hair. I'll help you when I come down. I shan't be a minute!"

As she hurried out of the brightly-lit kitchen, she looked back over her shoulder, and saw Miles watching her. She smiled at him and went on, her heart warm with a feeling of comradeship and good-will. She went through the dark dining-room, and looked into the lounge. They were all in there, Doctor Coat and Mr. Purvis and Aunt Emma and Uncle Peter, but fortunately they were gathered in a group under a lamp, and the rest of the lounge was fairly dark. She traversed it hastily, keeping close to the desk, and ran up the stairs.

And then, as soon as she reached that upper corridor, her happiness deserted her; she was in another world now, where there was no youth, no laughter, only sordid suspicion and chilly loneliness.

Her conscience reproached her for having forgotten Uncle Rufus. After all, she was staying here only on his account; she had money enough to leave now; nothing kept her but her promise to him.

"I'll just look in and see him," she thought. "And speak to Wren."

She went down the dim corridor to Uncle Rufus's room, and knocked softly at the door. There was no answer and she hesitated to knock louder, for fear of disturbing the old man. She tried the knob and the door opened.

To her surprise, the room was black, and from the open window a current of air blew cold on her face.

"Wren!" she whispered.

There was no answer; no sound at all.

Fear seized her; she stepped back into the hall and closed the door again.

But she knew she must go back. She could not leave the old man there alone in that dark wind-swept room. Once more she opened the door and felt for the switch; she turned it, but no light came.

"Wren!" she whispered again. "Please answer!"

The window-shade flapped in the draft made by the open door. But there was no other sound. She groped her way toward the bed, filled with a thought that turned her blood to ice.

But the bed was empty. She felt over it, from head to foot, and it was empty.

## Chapter Seven.
### The Monstrous Night

Back in her own room, with the light turned on and the door locked, she tried to think coolly.

"Of course, they may just have moved Uncle Rufus into another room," she said to herself.

Then suddenly she rebelled.

"No!" she thought. "It's cowardly and contemptible to go on this way, making up explanations for everything, pretending there can't be anything wrong. Suppose there is, and I'm just letting it go on? I ought to make sure. I've got to see Uncle Rufus with my own eyes."

There was a knock at her door.

"See here!" said Aunt Emma. "Will you be good enough to come down to your dinner at once? Doctor Coat and Mr. Purvis are hungry."

"Then I'm sorry for them," said Di, and opened the door. "Aunt Emma," she said, "where's Uncle Rufus? I went to his room, and he wasn't there?"

"Nevertheless, he is in his room," said Aunt Emma. "Perhaps with your customary ineptitude you went to the wrong room. It's not likely that he's gone out for a walk."

"I'd like to see him."

"Unfortunately, he wouldn't like to see you. He never wants to see anyone but Wren in the course of these attacks. To-morrow, when he's better, you can see him. And in the meantime, why not come downstairs and tell Doctor Coat and Mr. Purvis your suspicions? A doctor and a lawyer—you couldn't ask for anything better."

There was something in the older woman's cold insolence, something in her voice, her look, that was beginning to tell heavily upon Di. She resented it, yet in her resentment there was a sort of despair, as if her spirit warned her that she was no match for this woman. In every encounter she was worsted; each time Aunt Emma was able to convince her that she was a fool.

And she felt herself a fool now, as she went downstairs. Her aunt introduced the two strangers to her, Doctor Coat, a courtly old fellow with a white mustache and a handsome face, and a pleasant, rather stupid smile; Mr. Purvis, stout, grave, and a little pompous. Was it likely, if there was anything wrong here, that Aunt Emma would ask them to come? It was utterly impossible to suspect them of anything even mildly irregular.

They all sat down to that atrocious dinner, and though the stout Mr. Purvis looked rueful, neither of them seemed surprised. They were apparently at home here, and accustomed to Aunt Emma's style of living; and they talked, without constraint, of Uncle Rufus.

"Do you think there is any chance of his seeing me to-night, Emma?" asked Mr. Purvis. "If there is, of course I'll wait as late as I can."

"I don't know," she said. "Anyhow, he asked for you, and he knows you're here."

"Poor Rufus!" he said, with a sigh.

"Well," said Doctor Coat, in his comfortable and kindly way, "he's been through a great many of these attacks. And with Emma's splendid care, we'll hope that he'll come through this one. There's really no need for me here. Although, of course, I quite understand how you feel about it, Emma. If anything should happen there'd be criticism... Yes... quite so... If he can be persuaded to make a will, he'll feel very much better. Set his house in order... quite so!"

Then he turned to Diana.

"I hear he's taken a great liking to you," he said. "Very nice, I'm sure."

"I don't know," said Di. "I'm afraid—"

"She's almost morbidly self-distrustful," said Aunt Emma, interrupting. "Like her poor mother."

Mr. Purvis and Doctor Coat both looked at Di with a sort of sympathy.

"Come, come!" said the doctor. "Nothing so remarkable in his taking a liking to a charming young lady like you. He was really attached to your mother."

A silence fell.

"I'm going to meet Mr. Fennel at nine o'clock," Di was thinking. "I'm going to tell him every single thing, and get his opinion. I want to know if I'm just a morbid idiot, imagining things, or if there's any reason for being—uneasy. He's an outsider, he'll be unprejudiced."

Mr. Purvis began to talk now, about the League of Nations; he addressed himself entirely to Aunt Emma, and so did Doctor Coat. Occasionally they spoke to Di, amiably enough. Their manner toward Miles was one of distinct disapproval; he was evidently in disgrace. Peter Leonard they quite ignored.

Half-past eight, and they still sat at the table over the demi-tasses of astonishingly strong coffee Di had made. She was growing restless and impatient, looking down at her wrist watch under the table.

"But he said he'd wait an hour," she thought. "There's plenty of time."

She had ceased to listen to the conversation that went on; she was lost in her own confused and displeasing thoughts. And suddenly she had a sort of vision of this scene, as if she were detached and viewing it from a distance. This abandoned hotel in the woods; that black empty room upstairs; those most unfortunate children shut up somewhere; down here this dismantled room with chairs and tables piled against the walls and at this one table, this group. Uncle Peter, incredibly trivial, the "grasshopper" his son had called him; Miles, half-base, half-fine, and wholly reckless; Doctor Coat with his courtly air and his stupid smile; Mr. Purvis with his pompous gravity—and herself... All fools...? All puppets of that composed, gray-haired woman?

"She wanted me to come here and I came," thought Di. "She wanted me to stay and I'm staying. Is everything I do really what she has planned...?"

It was a singularly disturbing thought. More and more did she long to see Fennel, the outsider who could give her an unprejudiced opinion. She thought of him; how kindly he had spoken to poor Wren, remembered his air of quiet confidence, his steady glance...

"I didn't realize how nice it was of him to come all this way with Mrs. Frick's letter," she thought. "I didn't even thank him..."

Aunt Emma had risen and everyone else rose too, and proceeded toward the lounge. Twenty minutes to nine now.

"Come, Diana!" said Aunt Emma.

"I'll just wash the dishes first—"

"There's no need for that. Wren will come down early to-morrow morning."

"Then I'll just clear the table—"

"No," said Aunt Emma. "Leave everything as it is."

For a moment Diana stood looking at her.

"I ought to take things in my own hands," she thought. "I ought to say I'm going out for a few minutes. She couldn't stop me, before all these people. This is the time. This is the time to speak."

It was curiously difficult to speak, but she did speak.

"I think I'll go out—and get a breath of fresh air," she said.

"Miles will go with you."

This was a battle.

"No, thanks," said Di. "I'd rather go alone."

She was aware that everyone was listening; she was aware that her wish to go out alone surprised them all. But she was desperate. It seemed to her a matter of vital importance that she should conquer, should go out openly and freely.

"I'm sorry," said Aunt Emma, composedly. "But I can't permit it, my dear. This is a very lonely spot. If you object to Miles' conversation, he can walk behind you."

She was beaten. She *could* not say before all these people, that she was going out to meet a man—"like a servant wench" Uncle Rufus had said. And what is more, she did not need to tell Aunt Emma that. Aunt Emma knew already.

They all passed into the lounge and sat down; all except Diana.

"I *will* go!" she thought. "And I'll go openly, too."

As she stood by the window, Miles came over to her and offered her a cigarette. She was glad to accept one now, and as she took it, she looked at him, anxiously, half hoping that he might understand, and help her. But his face was white with anger; his glance was filled with anger and bitterness. He knew too, why she wanted to go.

"I'll pop up and see how the invalid's getting on!" said Uncle Peter, brightly, and rising went running up the stairs, two steps at a time.

No one else spoke, a stiff silence had fallen upon the little company. Miles had gone to his seat near the lamp.

Di opened the front door and stepped out, closed the door behind her and began to run toward the hill; she did not stop until she had reached the dark shelter of the trees. As she paused here a moment, she heard someone coming after her, running. She stopped behind a tree and waited.

It was too dark to see, but she was certain that the figure which ran past her was Miles. He went on plunging down the hill-side.

"Suppose he meets Mr. Fennel?" she thought, in alarm. "And tells him I can't come?"

Into her heart came the quiet conviction that Fennel wouldn't believe him, wouldn't believe anyone. He had come to speak to her; he had said he would wait for an hour and then come to the house, and he would do that. She trusted Fennel as she had never yet in her life trusted anyone. Miles would not be able to send him away. Fennel would not go until he had seen her.

The night wind was sharp; hatless and coatless, in her thin dress, she shivered. The pines rustled in the dark and, close to her, a little owl gave its trembling cry.

She waited and listened.

"It must be nine o'clock," she thought. "He's there and Miles will see him. Perhaps he'll pretend to go away, and then come back. Or perhaps he'll insist upon seeing me..."

"Perhaps he didn't go to look for Mr. Fennel at all," she thought. "He may simply have gone to the village—or rushed back to New York in a rage."

She began cautiously to descend the hill, straining her ears to catch any sound. But there was nothing but the rustle of the pines in the wind, and the cry of the little owl. She thought of Uncle Rufus coming down here this afternoon, and she shivered.

At last she was in sight of the clearing and the faint starlight showed it empty. But anyone could be standing in the shadows… She did not like the thought of Miles, standing there waiting. She remembered his white, angry face…

She waited and waited. If Fennel had pretended to go away, he would come back. Was Miles here, waiting for that?

Her teeth began to chatter with cold.

"Suppose I caught cold?" she thought. "Got ill—in that horrible house?"

She felt chilled to the bone already.

"I won't stand this!" she said to herself. "There's no reason why I shouldn't see Mr. Fennel or anyone else, if I want to. I won't hide. I won't be—secret. If Miles is there, very well! I'll tell him what I think of him for spying on me."

And she stepped down into the clearing. Was that something stirring among the trees?

"Mr. Fennel!" she cried.

No one came, no one answered.

"Mr. Fennel!" she called, again, her voice rising to a high note of fear.

This would not do, panic lay this way. With an effort, she stopped calling, and stood there, waiting. In the faint light of the stars, she could not see the dial of her watch. She did not know how long she had waited or must wait. Only she would endure it for as long as she could, for surely he would come.

She sat down on that fallen log, where she had seen him this afternoon, curled up her feet as best she could under her short skirt, folded her arms about her chest, and kept her vigil; in supreme physical misery, cold and cramped, in dread, in dismay. Sometimes she imagined she heard someone coming, and called his name, but there was never any answer. And at last she began to see that he was not coming.

She would have to go back to that house, to face Aunt Emma, to endure another scene with Miles. And after all she had no friend.

"If I had that ten dollars with me," she thought, "I'd never go back. I'd take a train for New York *now*. There's nothing illegal in not wearing a hat and coat."

But she had left the money in the pocket of her jersey when she had changed her dress before dinner. And there was her promise to Uncle Rufus.

Again she had forgotten Uncle Rufus. She got up, sick at heart, numb with cold, and began to climb the hill. She had promised to stand by him, and she could not leave him there, ill and helpless.

Light was shining from the windows of the lounge; she had no desire to go in there. She went round to the back of the house and quietly opened the kitchen door. The kitchen was dark, but the gas stove was lighted, under a singing kettle; it was blessedly warm. She sat down in a chair near the stove, to wait until this wretched chilliness was gone, before she must pass through the lounge on her way to the stairs.

"He didn't come," she thought. "But I know he meant to come. I know he *will* come soon. He knew there was something wrong. He'll come."

She was weary, almost exhausted; she nearly went to sleep there by the stove. But she heard that footstep. She sat up straight, her heart beating fast. Had he come to the house, as he had said he would? Surely that was someone coming up the back steps...

Then a door opened beside her, the door which led to the cellar, and clearly outlined in the bright light that shone behind him she saw Uncle Peter, pallid, grimy, without a collar, breathing hard, and on his face, a wild terrible look.

She gave a cry, and he leaped forward like a cat. His hand was pressed across her mouth, holding her head against the back of the chair. She struggled but she could not rise, could not make any sound. Then he drew back; she was about to cry out again when his fist shot out and caught her on the point of the jaw and she collapsed unconscious.

* * *

When she opened her eyes again she was lying on a bed. Her head ached cruelly; she felt deathly sick and giddy. It was utterly dark, she could see nothing, hear nothing; for a few minutes she could not remember.

Then it came back to her... Uncle Peter, the trivial, the cheerful, the one person in this house she had thought negligible...

She sat up. At first giddiness and the pain in her head forced her back on the pillow again, but the second time she felt better. She put her feet on the floor and still faint and dizzy, stood upright, holding by the head of the bed. She must find out where she was, what this dark prison was.

Her groping hand touched a little table, and a great hope sprang up in her. Moving nearer, she felt the lamp; it was there; she turned the switch and the light came. And with a sob of relief she found herself in her own room.

A little Paradise, it seemed to her, the safest, cosiest place in the world. She looked about her at her own belongings with the delight of one who has made a long and terrible journey and is at last home again.

Then she heard a noise in the corridor outside; a dragging, shuffling sound. She leaned forward in her chair. The wind had risen; that sound could be the branch of a tree brushing her window... Only it was coming nearer.

She knew now that this room was not safe and snug, but desperately exposed and that there was no corner where she could hide; she was sick and shaken, and defenseless.

Something scratched at her door. And not near the knob, but close to the floor, like an animal. She did not stir.

“Miss!” whispered Wren’s voice. “Oh, Miss! For God’s sake, let me in!”

She went to the door, but with her hand on the knob, she hesitated.

“What’s the matter?” she whispered back.

“Miss! Oh, let me in, quick! For God’s sake!”

But his voice came from below, as if he were at her feet...

"Miss!" he screamed, suddenly. "Quick!"

She turned the knob. The door was locked.

"Miss!" he screamed again. "For—"

His voice ceased abruptly. She heard nothing at all now.

"Wren!" she called, rattling the knob. "I can't! I can't!..."

Her knees gave way and she sank on the floor by the locked door. Her hand touched something wet, she raised it, stared at it with dilated eyes, saw it red with blood, and fell backward in a faint.

## Chapter Eight.
### The Candid Explanation

Sometime later in the night she got up from the floor, took off her shoes and lay down on the bed, wrapped in a blanket. She was shaking with a violent chill, tormented by a racking headache.

All the events of the night had become only part of a vast nightmare. She did not care what happened now, nothing mattered except to get warm. Time had ceased to exist; there was nothing in the world but this physical misery.

After the chill came fever, and a raging thirst. She lay there, crying silently because she so craved for water and could not rise to get it. Her head ached so… The light hurt her eyes…

"What's the matter, my dear?" asked Aunt Emma's voice beside her.

"I want—a glass of water!" she sobbed.

Her head was raised and a glass held to her lips.

"Another!" she said.

"Swallow these two pills with it."

She did not care what she swallowed, so long as she got the water.

A cold, wet cloth was laid on her throbbing head, the unbearable light was shaded, the tumbled covers straightened. She went to sleep.

* * *

She waked with a sigh, and stretched herself luxuriously in the cool, smooth bed. The window was open and the sweet air blew in. Turning her head she saw the sky filled with the soft, melting colors of sunset.

"Now!" said Aunt Emma. "A nice cup of broth and a piece of toast."

She had never tasted anything better than that broth, strong and well-flavored, that hot buttered toast without crusts. She still felt weak, but marvelously comfortable now, except for a slight soreness in her jaw.

"I was afraid that last night you were in for a bad time," said Aunt Emma. "You were delirious—quite a temperature."

Di did not answer; but she heard, and she understood; her brain felt extraordinarily lucid. She might have been delirious at some time in the night, but at present she was perfectly clear about everything. She remembered all the things that had actually happened with an odd sort of detachment, as if she were no longer personally concerned.

"I'll just let her go on," she thought. "She'll try to explain away everything by saying I was delirious. All right! Let her!"

She looked up at Aunt Emma with a glance of calm interest.

"Was I?" she asked.

"And no wonder," said Aunt Emma. "You had—a disturbing experience."

She sat down in a chair by the window, where the light breeze stirred her gray hair. She looked so rosy, so dignified, so solid…

"If you feel able," she said. "I think we'd better talk this over now."

"I feel all right," said Di.

And so she did; she felt perfectly able to listen to any tale Aunt Emma might choose to invent and to weigh and analyze it.

"It would take a good deal of generosity," Aunt Emma went on, "to forgive your Uncle Peter. I don't expect you to. But I can explain his behavior—if you care to listen."

"Yes, thank you, I should," said Di.

So Aunt Emma was not going to pretend that that blow was part of any delirium.

"Do you object to my smoking?" asked Aunt Emma, with gentlemanly politeness. "Perhaps with the window open, it won't bother you… No? Thanks!"

She lit a cigarette, and crossed her knees.

"We had a remarkably unpleasant evening," she proceeded, her blue eyes following the smoke. "It's fortunate that Coat and Purvis are such fools. They swallow everything… When you went out, I sent Miles after you, but he couldn't find you. So he did what anyone

might expect of him. He went down to the village, and procured a supply of bootleg whisky. I saw, when he got back, that he'd been drinking, but I didn't know he'd brought more of the stuff into the house. He put it in the cellar and every now and then he'd go down and get another drink. Before long, he became very troublesome. Purvis helped me to get him upstairs and into bed. I wanted to lock him into his room, but I couldn't find the key. I was seriously worried, for fear he would molest you. I went to your room to see if you had come in while I was busy with Miles; I knocked and when there was no answer, I opened the door and by the light of my torch I saw that you were lying fully dressed on the bed, apparently asleep. I spoke to you but you didn't answer, and I thought it better to lock your door."

She paused.

"An extremely unpleasant evening..." she continued. "I didn't know where you'd been or what you'd been doing... I went downstairs again. Coats and Purvis went home in a taxi, and I found your Uncle Peter in the kitchen—almost as bad as Miles. He'd been visiting the cellar... He was half-frightened and half-beastful. He said he had caught you trying to escape! I'll be quite candid with you. He thinks that Uncle Rufus is going to leave his money to you, and that therefore you're too valuable to lose. I agree with him about your Uncle Rufus. And I am perfectly willing to tell you that, if you do come into his money, I hope you'll give me some of it."

Her candor was astounding; she denied nothing that had happened, made no attempt to disguise her motives.

"I asked you here for that purpose," she said. "Uncle Rufus had been fond of your mother, and I hoped he'd take a fancy to you. And that gratitude, or family feeling, or sentiment, would induce you to give me enough to carry on my work."

Di looked at her aunt in wonder, a little dazed; everything was made so clear, so matter-of-fact.

"But—Wren?" she asked, almost involuntarily.

"Wren?" her aunt repeated. "What about him? Do you know anything about that little rat? For he's disappeared!"

"I don't know..." said Di, with unusual caution. "I thought I heard him call me—"

"When?" asked Aunt Emma. "I'd like very much to know. And it might help the police."

"The—*police*?"

"He went off with your Uncle Rufus's watch and money—some six thousand dollars he was carrying in his pockets."

"Oh, I'm sorry!" cried Di.

"He can stand the loss very well—"

"I wasn't thinking of that," said Di. "I'm sorry—for Wren."

"You needn't be," said Aunt Emma, dryly.

There was a moment's silence.

"How is Uncle Rufus?" asked Di.

"Better. He's been asking for you. You can see him to-morrow."

There was another silence.

"I'm not," said Aunt Emma, "extravagant in my personal life." She smiled faintly. "You've probably noticed that my housekeeping is not lavish. But I want—I need money for my work. Your Uncle Rufus is apparently recovering from this attack—but he can't last much longer. I hope that when you see him to-morrow, you'll be as amiable as your very youthful conscience will permit. It may mean more to you than you're able to realize, at your age. But I'm not pretending to think wholly of your welfare. I am thinking of my work."

She lit another cigarette.

"I've told you something about it. I have been making researches in regard to my theory of suggestibility. No one else has yet suspected the suggestibility of the average mind. People talk about the 'herd instinct'! The human herd has long ceased to act instinctively. It will, in fact, act in a manner directly opposed to its instinct. They talk of 'mob psychology.' The only psychology of a mob is that of its leaders. No mob acts spontaneously, but only upon the suggestion of one or more superior minds. A little observation will show you how infinitely more powerful suggestion is than instinct. The instinct of a mother to protect her infant is certainly

one of the strongest and most deep-rooted. Yet mothers were willing to throw their infants into the fire of Moloch when it was suggested to them. In times of war, it is suggested to a man that he loves his flag more than his own life, and he acts upon the suggestion."

She was silent for a moment.

"I have been working for nearly six years with those two children you have seen," she said. "In minds of that type one would suppose that mere animal instinct would enormously preponderate. I hope soon to demonstrate that it is not so. My great difficulty has been their propensity to imitate; and to differentiate between what is mere imitation and what is suggested action. They are only too ready to imitate..."

She rose, and tossed her cigarette out of the window.

"I'm afraid I'm inclined to be tedious on this subject," she said, and for the first time Di saw on her face a smile almost appealing. "I must get along now. I have all the cooking and so on to do, now that Wren's decamped. He couldn't have chosen a worse time... Now, your Uncle Peter will come up and apologize."

"Oh, no, *thanks*!" said Di, hastily. "I'd really rather he didn't."

"He ought to," said Aunt Emma. "He's waiting to do so. I advise you to let him."

"No, thanks, really. I'd hate it."

"Do you hate *him*?" asked Aunt Emma.

"No..." said Di. "I don't hate him..."

"Well!" said Aunt Emma. "I'll be back later, with some dinner for you. You mustn't think of getting up to-day. But by to-morrow you ought to be quite yourself. And after you've seen your Uncle Rufus, the best thing you can do is to go back to New York. You've had a fairly unpleasant visit, I'm afraid. Have you friends in New York, and enough money to carry on for a while?"

"Yes, thank you, Aunt Emma."

"I've brought you some books and magazines, the sort of thing I imagine would interest you. I sent Miles for them."

Then she mounted a chair briskly, and set about fastening an extension cord to the electric light and clamped a reading-lamp to the head of the bed. She put the books and papers on the table and then took up a queer old-fashioned little knitted sack of pink wool.

"Let me put this around your shoulders," she said. "Now!"

There was something touching to Di in these attentions, something she had liked very well in her aunt's blunt sincerity. A sense of profound relief filled her, as if the light of day had been admitted into some dark chamber, and what had seemed horrible was not horrible at all. The shadow of death had passed, Uncle Rufus was getting better and, greatest relief of all, Aunt Emma had herself suggested that she should leave.

Aunt Emma's motives were certainly not disinterested; Uncle Peter had shown himself capable of an astounding brutality; Uncle Rufus was not a lovable uncle. Miles was a distressing problem; Wren had turned out to be a thief; it was not a pleasant household. But she could make allowances now for all of them; she could forgive them their offenses against herself, and pity their sordid failings, because to-morrow she was leaving them and because everything here was explicable now; ugly and depressing, but not sinister, not frightening any longer.

"And Mr. Fennel," she thought. "Something prevented his coming. I *know* I'll hear from him again. Probably to-morrow."

She lay for a time, looking out at the darkening sky, and thinking of Fennel. She felt so certain that she could see him again, so certain he was her friend.

"How nice of him to have come all this way with Mrs. Frick's letter! I wish I hadn't lost it. It might have explained a little about him... He's different from any other man I've seen. He's..."

It occurred to her that her reverie was becoming a little ridiculous, and reaching up, she turned on the lamp, and picked up a magazine. A footstep in the hall made her glance up, and she saw Miles in the doorway.

"Diana...?" he said.

She thought she had never seen anything more pitiable than his handsome, wasted face, pallid, drawn, hollow-eyed; anything more painful than his strained smile.

"How are you?" he asked.

"Oh, fine, thanks!" she answered, with artificial brightness.

"Anything I can do for you, Diana?"

"Not a thing in the world, thanks, Miles."

He was silent for a moment, and they did not look at each other.

"I thought..." he said. "Wouldn't you like some ice-cream, Diana? I can run down to the village and get it..."

She could not refuse this peace-offering.

"That would be awfully nice," she said, and was distressed by the obviously false cheerfulness of her own voice.

"All right! I'll get it," he said, and was gone.

His haggard, desperate face haunted her; she began to read again, in haste to forget him, for she could do nothing more for Miles.

Presently Aunt Emma appeared with a tray, upon which was a supper immeasurably better than any meal Di had yet had in this house; a broiled lamb chop, a potato baked in its jacket, a salad of lettuce and tomato, a cup of coffee and a slice of sponge cake.

"How nice!" she said, pleased.

Aunt Emma smiled.

"I never cooked before to-day in my life," she observed. "But with Wren gone, I saw it was inevitable. So I sat down and studied the cook-book for an hour, until I'd mastered the general principles of cooking. Then I applied the theory. It's amusing. I was tempted to do superfluous things. That sponge cake, for instance..." She looked down at it. "I believe it's good," she said. "It's—Put it down, child, until you've eaten the chop!"

"I had to try it!" said Di. "It's perfect!"

Aunt Emma was manifestly pleased and so was Diana; there was a charming atmosphere of homely good-will. Aunt Emma making a cake!

Before her footsteps had died away, Miles returned, with the ice-cream in a dish.

"May I come in?" he asked, and when she said yes, he entered and set the dish down on the table.

"Diana..." he said. "I'm—not going to talk any more... I'll just try to show you... I—can't expect you—to have any faith in me... But... but you'll see, Diana..."

His voice was painfully unsteady and he did not look at her.

"If you want anything," he said, "I'll be here—all the time."

She wanted to speak to him, but to save her life she could not think of a word that would sound natural and friendly. Halfway to the door he turned and looked at her, sitting there in the queer little old-fashioned pink jacket, with her fair hair loose. And she could not bear the look on his face. With an anxious, uncertain smile, she held out her hand; he strode back to her, knelt beside her, holding her hand over his eyes.

"Forgive me, Diana!" he whispered. "I'm sorry..."

"Of course!" she said, in a cheerful, matter-of-fact voice. But she nearly wept, looking down at his dark head. From the very first she had felt for Miles this pity, this tenderness, this unreasonable indulgence, that was almost maternal.

"I'm so sorry!" he said, again. "Just give me one more chance!"

"Yes, I will. Miles! Get up! My nice dinner's getting cold—and the ice-cream is melting."

For she felt that if he did not go at once, she would begin to cry over him, and he would certainly misunderstand that. He sprang up, full of contrition.

"See you to-morrow!" she said, brightly, as he left the room, and he smiled at her, comforted.

She sighed profoundly and began her dinner.

"Even when I leave here," she thought, "I shan't be rid of Miles; I'll have to go on seeing him, forever and ever. No one else seems to care a bit for him. And he needs someone to care, so terribly. He's so —doomed..."

But even the doomed Miles could not make her unhappy that evening. She had a quiet, cosy evening, reading, an amiable little chat with Aunt Emma; then she turned out the light and settled

herself for sleep, filled with a quiet confident happiness.

"Perhaps he lives at Mrs. Frick's," she thought. "Anyhow, I'll probably hear from him to-morrow..."

And everything was explained now; everything was clear and open. To-morrow she would leave here, and begin a new phase of her life...

* * *

She waked with a start, and sat up in bed, her heart racing. She did not know what had awakened her, what had startled her, but there lay upon her the oppression of a forgotten dream.

She turned on the light and looked about the little room. All neat and tranquil here. What was it that she had forgotten...?

Then she remembered. Last night, when she had lain down on the bed, there had been blood on her hand. And now her hand was clean. There had been blood on the carpet, by the door... She got up and went to the door, and, a little giddy, stooped to examine the carpet. There was surely a faint stain there, as of something that could not be quite scrubbed clean.

If Wren had come to her door, unknown to anyone else, the stain would not be faint, like this. If anyone had washed her hand, and cleaned the carpet, then whoever had done this must know of Wren's coming.

"Perhaps Aunt Emma just didn't want to worry me," she said to herself, with her old instinct to deny what was strange and unpleasant. "I'll ask her in the morning."

She turned out the light, lay down again, and resolutely closed her eyes; immediately she had a vision of Wren crawling along the corridor on his hands and knees, scratching at her door... "Miss! For God's sake, let me in!..."

She turned on the light again, in haste. When she had spoken of Wren, Aunt Emma had seemed startled, had asked if she had seen him. No... It *was* queer, it was wrong, that if she had washed the blood from the girl's hand, she should have made no mention of it.

Well, suppose someone else had washed her hand and cleaned the floor? Who else? And if Wren had robbed Uncle Rufus and successfully escaped, what was he doing outside her door, desperately urgent to be admitted?

Everything was not clear and open. With Wren unexplained, all the rest of the explanation was worthless.

"Aunt Emma must have known," she thought. "Nothing goes on here that she doesn't know... I don't believe poor little Wren's a thief, anyhow. She's just made that up, to explain—something... To explain what?..."

All the old dread and confusion had returned. She took up a book and tried to read, but every sound made her start. It was nearly morning when she dropped asleep.

When she opened her eyes, the sun was shining; her watch had stopped, but she felt sure it was late. She got up at once, washed in cold water, and began to dress. She was immensely relieved to find the ten-dollar bill still in the pocket of her jersey; her way of escape was still open.

"And this time," she thought. "I'm not going to be cautious and tactful. I'm not going to be put off. I'm going to ask Aunt Emma point-blank who cleaned up the carpet."

Her knees were still a little weak and the bruise on her jaw was still sore, but she felt very well, and very resolute.

"I'm sick and tired of all this mystery!" she thought. "I want to know what really happened to Wren."

The lounge was empty, the dining-room was empty, but in the kitchen she found Aunt Emma washing dishes.

"Well!" said Aunt Emma. "You're early! Did you have a good night?"

She looked so fresh and neat and pleasant, in her white overall, so innocently and beneficently employed in this humdrum task, that it was difficult to challenge her.

"Not so very," said Di. "I—got thinking—about Wren."

"About Wren?" Aunt Emma repeated. "Well, I hope we'll soon see that cleared up."

"You see," Di went on, "he came to my door last night... I couldn't let him in, because the door was locked... And—blood came under the door... On the carpet—on my hand..."

Even here, in the kitchen where the morning sun was shining, it was horrible to think of that.

"Ah!" said Aunt Emma. "So that's what it was? I noticed it, naturally. But I didn't know whether you, in your feverish condition had noticed it or not. So I thought I'd say nothing unless you asked me. Wren, was it? He must have hurt himself in some way."

Very composed, very plausible was Aunt Emma. But Di was not satisfied.

"I don't see—" she began.

"Wait a moment!" said Aunt Emma, and opening the back door: "Rogers!" she called.

A stout, clean-shaven man ran up the steps.

"This is Detective Rogers, from the East Hazelwood Police Station. He's come to investigate this robbery, and Wren's disappearance. You must tell him everything you know—while I make you some fresh coffee."

Certainly this cleared Aunt Emma from the last suspicion. She had called in the police herself.

# Chapter Nine.
## "Do Not Leave This House"

"Well..." said Rogers, "it seems you were the last one to hear anything of this man. Now what time did he knock at your door?"

"I don't know," said Di.

"About what time?"

"I haven't any idea what time it was."

"Ten o'clock?"

"I really don't know."

"We'll see if we can't get at it," said Rogers.

He was standing with one foot on the bottom step, and Di stood on the kitchen porch above him, very uneasy at this unexpected examination. There were so many things she did not wish to mention.

"Now, what time did you have dinner?" asked Rogers.

"About quarter to seven."

"And after dinner, what did you do?"

"We went to the lounge."

"How long did you stay there?"

"I—I went out—at nine o'clock for—a little walk."

"How far did you walk?"

"Just to a little clearing, down the hill."

"How long did that take you?"

"Five or ten minutes."

"Then you went back to the house?"

"No. I stayed there for a while."

"How long? Ten minutes?"

"Longer than that."

"Twenty minutes?"

"I—I think it was longer than that. I don't know. I didn't see the time."

"We'll call it half an hour. Thirty minutes then, ten minutes walk each way, that'd bring you back to the house about 9.40. Then what did you do?"

"I was chilly. I sat in the kitchen a little while."

"Ten minutes?"

"I—don't know."

"And after that?"

"I—went to bed."

"You were asleep when Wren knocked at the door?"

"Yes…"

"Well," said Rogers. "I guess we'll have to let the time go. What did Wren say to you?"

"He asked me to let him in."

"What did you answer?"

"I—think I asked him what was the matter?"

"What did he say?"

"He asked again for me to let him in. Then he stopped talking—suddenly."

"Did you hear him walk away?"

"No."

"You say you found blood under the door?"

"Yes."

"What did you do?"

"I—think I fainted."

"When you came to yourself, I suppose you called for help?"

"My aunt was there. I was—rather ill, feverish…"

"I see…" said Rogers. "Now what dealings had you had with Wren?"

"I never had any 'dealings.'"

"Any idea why he came to you?"

"No."

"That afternoon Wren brought you a private message from a man called Fennel?"

"It wasn't a 'private' message. He just told me that Mr. Fennel wanted to see me."

"You met Fennel in the wood?"

"Yes."

"What did you know about Fennel?"

"He brought me a letter from a friend."

"What's the name and address of the friend?"

Reluctantly she gave him Mrs. Frick's address.

"You're personally acquainted with Fennel?"

"I hadn't met him before, but—"

"Can you describe him?"

"Why?" she demanded. "He has nothing to do with this."

"Don't be too sure of that!" said Rogers. "Now, was this Fennel a man of medium height, slender, dark complexion and mustache, nice gentlemanly ways?"

"That description would apply," said Aunt Emma from the doorway.

"That's 'Smoky' all right," said Rogers. "That's just the way he works, too. What they call one of these society burglars."

"He's not a burglar," said Di, briefly. "It's ridiculous—"

"Now, I understand that while you were talking to this Fennel, your uncle came, and there were words."

"He was angry because I'd left him alone. There weren't any 'words,' except his own."

"But just the same he got so excited he had some sort of fit?"

"Attack. Heart attack," said Aunt Emma.

"Attack," said Rogers. "You then went to the house, leaving Fennel alone with your uncle? And Fennel was presently joined by Wren?"

"Yes. But—"

"Did you, at any time subsequent to this, see Fennel and Wren together?"

"I did," said Aunt Emma. "After I'd invented a plausible reason for getting Fennel out of the house, I found him out on the drive, talking to Wren. He went away at once as soon as I appeared."

"Yes," said Rogers. "That's how he works. When he was alone with the old gentleman, he found that money in his pockets. But he was too smart to lift it then. No... He gets Wren to do the dirty work —"

"That's ridiculous!" cried Di. "Mr. Fennel—"

"He always makes a good impression," said Rogers. "No. He's 'Smoky,' all right. Depend on it! Now, if I can just use your telephone—"

"It's out of order," said Aunt Emma.

"Too bad! Well, I'll just take a look around the house... Old gentleman able to answer any questions?"

"It's not advisable for him to talk much," said Aunt Emma. "But he's so disturbed about the loss of the money, it may do him good to see that steps are being taken. If you'll be careful to excite him as little as possible."

"Trust me!" said Rogers.

Aunt Emma addressed herself to Di.

"I've just put your breakfast ready in here," she said. "You won't mind eating in the kitchen, my dear? And there's a letter for you, that came this morning. I'll go with Rogers while he questions your Uncle Rufus."

As soon as they were out of sight, Di took the letter from the table, and tore it open.

> "Dear Miss Leonard:
>
> "*I was very sorry indeed to fail you at our little rendezvous last night. Believe me, it was a great disappointment to me. But circumstances prevented it. Please accept the enclosed as a little mark of my admiration—and my regret that we cannot meet again.*
>
> "*Yours most sincerely,*
> "James Fennel."

She unfolded the enclosed paper, and found in it a fifty-dollar bill.

Her knees trembled under her, and she sank into a chair by the table.

"Oh, no!" she said, half aloud. "Oh, no!"

It seemed to her that she was mortally stricken by this blow, that she could never get over it. Not only the revelation that Fennel was a thief, but the insult of his sending her this money, the tone of his note…

"I liked him," she thought, "I liked him—better than any other man I've ever met."

She poured herself a cup of coffee, cooled it with milk and drank it. And remembered Fennel, his steady dark eyes, his quick, vivid smile…

"It can't be true!" she cried to herself.

Then she thought that perhaps other women had said that of him. "That was the way he worked…" Other credulous women were charmed by that smile, by that quiet, serious, almost stiff manner…

But he had come with a letter from Mrs. Frick.

"If only I hadn't lost that letter!" she thought. "But I'll see Mrs. Frick this afternoon. I'll ask her about him. Perhaps—"

Perhaps he was not a thief. But he had written this insolent note, had sent her money.

"But maybe he didn't realize," she thought. "Maybe he only—wanted to be—kind…" Kind? "My regret that we cannot meet again…"

The profound instinct of her nature was loyalty. She had a quick, and remarkably sound intuition in the reading of character; she saw people's virtues, and forever cherished them; she saw their weaknesses and could excuse them. And she had seen in that man something strong and fine, something which her heart refused to discredit. She was cruelly affronted by his letter, profoundly troubled by the suspicion that Rogers had evoked, but she *could not* dismiss Fennel as utterly worthless.

"I don't understand!" she thought, in despair. "I'll put him out of my mind. I'll forget him. I must forget him."

But she did not. A leaden oppression weighed upon her. That Rogers seemed so confident, so resolute; suppose he found Fennel, arrested him, sent him to prison?

"I'll have to be a witness," she thought. "Against him… I'll have to admit that I left him alone with Uncle Rufus… And this letter—"

She jumped up, went to the dining-room door, listened, and when she was sure she was not seen, set fire to the letter and burnt it to ashes in a plate, then threw the ashes out of the window and rinsed the plate.

Now she was finished with Fennel.

She was still trying to eat the excellent breakfast set out for her when her aunt re-entered the room.

"Not very satisfactory," she observed, with a sigh. "Your Uncle Rufus is difficult to handle. And this detective… Their one idea is to see these men in jail. *I* don't want Wren in jail. I want him here, in the kitchen. He was very useful to me. As for his theft, it didn't surprise me. Naturally not. I knew he'd been in jail before. Only here, until Uncle Rufus came, there was nothing for him to steal." Again she sighed. "Now there'll be all the stupidity and bother of a trial… Of course they'll catch Fennel and Wren."

Fennel and Wren bracketed together.

"They may not," said Di.

"Uncle Rufus told this detective that every one of the missing bills was marked, with two crosses in green ink on the corners. That will make it much easier to trace them."

She took a packet of cigarettes from her overall pocket and lit one.

"You'll want to see Uncle Rufus," she said. "And then Miles will drive you in to New York."

Di remembered her promise.

"I think Uncle Rufus expects me to stay…" she said.

"You can ask him," said Aunt Emma. "Now, while we're here, undisturbed, I want to have a little talk with you. It's not going to be very pleasant for either of us, but I'm afraid it can't be avoided."

"It's about Fennel," thought Di, and clasped her hands together under the table.

"I am in need of money," Aunt Emma went on, "desperately in need of money to carry on my work. Neither Peter nor Miles are able—or willing—to help me. I have no one else. That is why I am going to tell you—what it would be kinder not to tell you."

Di waited, very pale.

"You know, of course, what your father was like," Aunt Emma went on. "But you can't remember your mother. She was one of the very few persons—she was perhaps the only person who was ever really fond of me. I don't know why. There is nothing natural about affection. Certainly when Harvey was first married, I felt nothing but disgust and annoyance. I knew he couldn't support a wife and I knew he'd ask me to help him. He did. At that time, I had all the money I needed for the rest of my life. I wasn't by any means rich, but my father had left me enough money to live on, so that I could work without troubling about my daily bread. When Harvey came to me for money, I refused him. I had nothing whatever to spare and he knew it.

"Then he sent his wife. She was a pretty girl... Very pretty, very gallant and honest..." she was silent for a moment.

"Poor little Inez..." she said.

It seemed to Di that this was intolerable, beyond her powers of endurance.

"She came, like you, and offered to help me with my work, for a small salary—any salary... She was quick and intelligent, but pitiably unfit for scientific work. And not strong. She tired easily. I was glad to lend her small sums of money from time to time, but I couldn't let her work for me. I don't know how they managed to live. It must have been hard for her. I have never seen anyone change so... Then one day she came to me. She was ill then, very ill and desperate. Your father was seriously involved in some discreditable business. I admit that he was more of a fool than a knave; he hadn't realized what he was doing. But that wouldn't have helped him, in court. Inez literally didn't have a penny. She came here, with you... And I was sorry for her. I helped your father out of his difficulty, and I set them on their feet again. To do this, I had to sell some of my holdings, and my income was cut in half. And I've never had one day free from financial anxiety since then."

She rose.

"That's all," she said. "I have no proofs. It never occurred to me to demand any sort of written acknowledgment from your father. I knew he'd never be able to repay me. If you choose to do so, when you come into Uncle Rufus's money—"

"I'll sign—a note—or something—" said Di, unsteadily.

"It wouldn't be worth the paper it was written on," said Aunt Emma.

"Then I'll give you—my word—that if I ever do get any money—"

"Very well!" said Aunt Emma. "I know you mean that—now. But when you've left here, you'll begin to think. 'Why should I believe Aunt Emma. She has no proof. It's very much more agreeable not to believe her.'"

"Then what *can* I do?"

"Nothing," said Aunt Emma. "Except remember. Now you'd better come and see your Uncle Rufus."

Di rose and followed her.

"I wish I'd never been born," she thought.

All her past was clouded with the sorrow of her mother, with disgrace and misery. The present was beyond measure bitter, and lonely; she had no friends, no home, no money, and that letter from Fennel was to her like a personal disgrace.

"There must be something—wrong in me," she thought, "or he wouldn't have dared to do that. He must have been sure I wouldn't show the letter or the money to the police. He must have seen..."

They mounted the stairs and went to Uncle Rufus's room. She remembered that she had believed she found it dark and empty the other evening, but, with so many empty rooms, it would be very easy to make a mistake. It was not empty now, Uncle Rufus lay in the bed, and Uncle Peter sat beside him, sprawled out in a chair. The blind was drawn down, and the room looked singularly gloomy and depressing for a sick-room.

Uncle Peter sprang up as they entered.

"Morning!" he said to Di, in a muffled, embarrassed voice. "I hope you're well?"

"Yes, thanks," she answered, curtly enough.

"Uncle Rufus," said Aunt Emma, mildly. "Here's Diana. Do you want to talk to her?"

"No!" said the old man, curtly.

He was, she thought, a remarkably unpleasant object, sitting propped up with pillows, wrapped in a voluminous dressing-gown, and wearing on his head a red Turkish fez with a jaunty black tassel. And the room was so dim, so close, so horribly depressing... She went nearer to the bed.

"Would you like me to stay here—in the house—?" she asked, in a low voice. "Until you're feeling better, Uncle Rufus?"

"I don't care what you do," he answered, and flounced over on his side, with his back to her.

She waited for a moment and then turned away. Aunt Emma was still in the doorway, with a faint smile on her lips.

"We're not a demonstrative family," she observed. "Now... Do you want to go at once or wait until after lunch?"

"I'd like to help you—wash the dishes—or something," said Di.

"There's a woman coming from the village to do all that, thanks."

"Then I'll pack now," said Di, and went to her own room.

Locking her door she took the fifty-dollar bill out of her pocket and examined it. On two corners there were tiny crosses made in green ink.

"What shall I do with it?" she thought. "I ought to get it back to Uncle Rufus somehow. It's his..."

She stood looking at it, feeling to the fullest extent all her desolation, her grief, her disappointment. She was going—to what? To no other friend than Mrs. Frick, and going back in immeasurably worse condition than she had left, saddened by the knowledge of her mother's past suffering, worn out by the horrible experiences she had had here, humiliated by her betrayed trust in Fennel, still half-sick from her recent fever, defeated...

Then, suddenly, her spirit rose in arms. She *would not* be defeated and humiliated.

"I've done nothing to be ashamed of!" she said to herself. "I'm going to go back to New York and forget all this. As if it were a nightmare. I have all my life before me. I *won't* be miserable! I won't!"

She opened her trunk briskly and the sight of the dresses that Angelina had given her was balm to her.

"Angelina will come back some day," she thought. "Lord! It's good to remember that there are people like her in the world—happy people, full of life and courage. This house isn't the world. Once I get away, I'll see everything differently. I'm afraid my family isn't very—wholesome."

She looked out of the window, and saw the blue April sky, and her spirits rose and rose.

"Even if Miles is pretty awful, driving in," she thought, "it'll soon be over. To-night—this very night—I'll be at Mrs. Frick's! I'll go out to an Italian restaurant and have a nice little dinner. Perhaps I'll take Mrs. Frick to the movies. It'll be like Heaven, after this!"

She powdered her nose and put on her hat, and the very sight of herself in a hat was a delight. At last she was going. She picked up her bag and turned toward the door.

On the carpet, near the door, was a white square of paper. She stooped and picked it up. There were some words written on it in pencil:

> "Do not leave this house. If you go they will kill me. Burn this. For God's sake, do not leave this house."

# Chapter Ten.
## The Forbidden Room

There was no one to turn to, no one to consult, no one to help her.

She read and re-read those words, scrawled on what seemed a scrap torn from a paper bag.

"I think—it's Wren..." she said to herself. "He tried to tell me something before. He's still here..."

She thought of Rogers. If Wren were really in danger...? But Rogers would find him and arrest him, send him to prison. She was not asked to give any assistance, only not to go away, as if only her presence here prevented a crime.

"Aunt Emma wants me to go," she thought.

After all, was it Wren who had written? It might be someone else. Uncle Rufus, perhaps? He had told her plainly enough that he believed his life to be in danger, and had asked her to remain here. Perhaps he had been somehow intimidated, and dared not urge her to stay while those people were in the room.

But whoever had written, and whatever the cause, she could not go until she had discovered the meaning of that note. She took off her hat and almost laughed.

"I can't go," she thought. "I'll *never* be able to leave—"

That was a bad thought to entertain. Never be able to leave? Had she known that the first day she came here? Something had weighed so heavily upon her then... As if she had known that she could never get away, never get back to the cheerful outside world, that here was the end...

"No!" she said to herself. "I cannot think—things like that. I have no one but myself to depend on now. I've got to keep cool. I've got to be sensible."

She tore the note into fragments, and putting them into the wash-basin, let the water run on them until they were washed down the drain.

What helped her was the thought that some other human creature had appealed to her.

"I've got to find out," she said to herself. "I've got to use my wits."

There was, first of all, the ordeal of telling Aunt Emma that she had changed her mind about going. She discovered then that she was afraid of Aunt Emma; Uncle Peter had been brutal, Uncle Rufus not much better, Miles was dangerously uncertain, yet of all the inmates of this house, Aunt Emma, who had tended her kindly when she was ill, who had brought up her meals, Aunt Emma was the one she feared most.

"But I have the advantage now," she told herself. "Aunt Emma expects to get money from me. She can't afford to antagonize me. I've got to use that advantage."

She opened her door and went out into the corridor. There was no reason why that long red-carpeted hall should seem horrible to her; no reason to think the silence here was sinister... A door opened behind her, and Aunt Emma came out.

"Ready?" she asked. "If you are, I'll call Miles."

"I've been thinking—" said Di. "While I was dressing I felt—quite miserable... If you don't mind, I'd like to stay here, in the country, for another day or so, until I feel better."

Aunt Emma made no answer for a time.

"I think you're making a mistake," she said at last. "This house isn't good for you."

A threat, was that?

"The country's so pretty, this time of the year," said Di.

"You're highly nervous and impressionable," Aunt Emma went on. "If I'd realized that before, I'd never have let you come here. There's something about this house..."

She came quickly down the hall, and turned the knob of the door next to Uncle Rufus's room. It opened, she looked at the lock, looked down at the floor, and then closed the door again.

"Let me try your key!" she said, and Di gave it to her.

"No, it doesn't fit," she said. "Very well! If you're going to stay here, let me earnestly warn you against going into that room."

"That—sounds like Bluebeard," said Di, with a pretty poor attempt at lightness.

Aunt Emma stood with her back to the door, looking at the girl with a faint smile.

"After Bluebeard was dead," she said, "and the unlucky wives removed, do you think the family ever cared much for that little room?"

Di looked back at her, not understanding, yet uneasy.

"I imagine," Aunt Emma proceeded, "that no one would ever use that room again. Even when the sun shone into it. Even if the castle were pulled down, one stone from the walls of that room, built into some other wall, would bring dreams…"

"Well, but Bluebeard never lived here," said Di, more and more disturbed.

"I believe you went in there once, by mistake, thinking it was Uncle Rufus's room," said Aunt Emma. "Perhaps you felt then that it wasn't—" she paused—"a good room for you to be in," she added, with the grim shadow of a smile. "If you're going to stay here, I warn you, for your own peace of mind. There's nothing there. See!" She flung open the door, and Di saw a neat bare room with the usual hotel furnishings. Aunt Emma closed the door again. "Don't go in there—*if you can help it*."

"That shouldn't be difficult," said Di, smiling herself.

For she was, to the best of her ability, defying Aunt Emma. She knew she must do this, for the good of her soul. She must not be repressed or dismayed.

"Can I help you with the lunch?" she asked.

Aunt Emma accepted the offer, and they went downstairs together. And all the way, Di was thinking "Why mustn't I go into that room? And why should I want to?"

She tried to forget that room.

"I've stayed here to find out who wrote me that note," she told herself. "That's the important thing. That's what I must think of."

But she kept on thinking about the room. She remembered going into it that night, finding it empty and dark, with the wind blowing into it. And hadn't she, even then, felt something there, something terrible…?

"No!" she said to herself. "And anyhow, it doesn't matter. That's not the important thing."

She moved about the kitchen, working under Aunt Emma's directions, beating eggs for an omelette, making cocoa for Uncle Rufus.

"Did she mean that something had happened in that room? Well, what of it? Nothing to do with me! I *must* think about that note. I must do something."

With no little effort, she forced herself to return to that subject.

"It must have been written either by Wren or Uncle Rufus. The first thing is, to find out if Uncle Rufus wrote it. If he didn't, then Wren must be somewhere in the house..."

That was not an agreeable thought, that someone was hidden in this house, among all these empty rooms.

"If I find that Uncle Rufus wrote it, I'm going to tell that detective," she thought. "But if it was Wren—I can't. He did all he could for me. I won't help to send him to jail."

"Diana," said Aunt Emma, "will you take this tray up to your Uncle Rufus? Then come down, and we'll have our own lunch."

Di took the tray and went toward the door.

"The back stairs," said Aunt Emma, opening a door, "It saves a good many steps."

Di had not known before of this back stairway leading up from the kitchen. It was dark, with a closed door at the top, and darker still as Aunt Emma closed the kitchen door behind her. And at once, as that door shut, she began thinking again of the forbidden room.

"Oh, how stupid and disgusting of me!" she cried to herself, in a sort of despair. "Exactly like Bluebeard's wife! Just because Aunt Emma said not to go into it... She probably did that on purpose—one of her horrible psychological experiments... Perhaps she wants to divert my mind from other things..."

She reached the door at the top, and had to set down the tray, to open the door.

"If only I can get a word alone with Uncle Rufus... And I'll look into that room, just to prove to myself..."

She came out into an unfamiliar corridor, that branched off from the main one; this one, too, was lined with closed doors.

"There must be at least twenty-five empty rooms in this floor," she thought. "And I don't know what's upstairs. There's the cellar, too. It's all very well for me to talk about 'searching the house,' but it's not going to be an easy job. Especially without being seen..."

Uncle Rufus's door was closed, and she knocked. There was no answer, and presently she knocked again. The silence alarmed her; she tried the handle, and found the door locked.

"Uncle Rufus!" she called.

A door across the corridor opened and Uncle Peter appeared.

"Ah!" he said, jauntily. "A little refreshment! I can do with that!"

"It's for Uncle Rufus," said Di, indignantly. "His door's locked—"

"I know," said Uncle Peter, with his old apologetic air. "He was asleep, and I just stepped into my own room for a smoke—"

"Please unlock the door!"

"Certainly!" he said. "Certainly!" He took the key from his pocket, put it into the lock and flung open the door.

Uncle Rufus was not asleep; he was sitting bolt upright in the bed in that dark, close room.

"Are you feeling better?" Di asked, stirred to pity and concern for him.

He only shook his head.

"Here's some nice hot cocoa," she went on. "Will you let me—?"

"I'll have to feed him," whispered Uncle Peter.

"Let me!" said Di.

"No," protested Uncle Peter. "I understand his ways, y'know." Di went nearer to the bed, but Uncle Peter blocked the way. "Please don't get him worked up!" he whispered.

Di looked over her shoulder at the old man and saw him looking at her sidelong.

"Uncle Rufus!" she cried. "Please—just tell me how you feel?"

"Better!" he croaked, in a hoarse voice.

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Don't go till I'm better—" he said, in that same hoarse, painful voice.

"I won't!" she said. "Wouldn't you like—?"

"He's hungry," Uncle Peter explained, and at once began feeding him with the cocoa. "When you go down, would you mind telling your Aunt Emma that *I'm* hungry too? She keeps me shut up here... Least she can do is to remember my food."

"Uncle Rufus," said Di, looking steadily at the old man. "I'll stay. I'll be here—all the time—if you want anything. I'll come back after lunch and see you."

The room was too dim for her to see his face clearly at that distance, but she hoped that he understood.

"He wrote that note," she thought. "He's afraid. Something horrible is going on."

As she left the room, Uncle Peter closed the door behind her, and she heard the key turn in the lock. The impulse seized her to bang on the door and make him open it again. She could not endure the thought of the old man locked in there, helpless and frightened. And in spite of her previous experience with him, she had no fear of Uncle Peter, only contempt.

"But that wouldn't do any good," she thought. "I'll have to handle this thing better than that. Somehow, I'm going to get away this afternoon and find that detective."

She had almost reached the head of the front stairs when something checked her. That room... Now was her chance to look at it, to rid herself, once and for all, of this preposterous obsession.

She turned back, she hesitated; she listened.

"Perhaps that's just what Aunt Emma wants," she thought. "For me to go in there. Perhaps there's something—I won't like..."

Better to see it, though, whatever it was; better to go, and be done with it. She went softly past Uncle Rufus's door, to that other door, put her hand on the knob. And again she hesitated.

"Perhaps I'll be sorry..." she said to herself.

But she turned the knob, and opened the door.

Nothing there, surely, to trouble the most timid. Through the window she could see the blue sky, the tree tops, inside, only a dusty neatness. She stepped over the threshold.

Then she felt it. A strange tingling in her veins, a dread, an excitement, that made her heart beat fast. But there was nothing there; nothing at all…

She looked toward the door of the clothes-closet.

"All right!" she said, aloud, and with a sort of rush, went over to it and flung it open. Nothing there but empty shelves and hooks. She closed the door again, and looked about her. Nothing anywhere.

Yet somehow this blankness did not reassure her. Her oppression, her feeling of dread and excitement was increasing; she could not believe there was really nothing here; she felt only that she had not found—what there was to find. She opened the drawers of the bureau; all empty.

And her fear grew. There was something here, something in the very air that stifled her. She hurried to the window, to open it, and stopped there, with her face grown white as chalk.

For printed on the window-sill in neat black letters was a name:

"Inez."

Her mother's name… Why was that here?

Ever since she had come into this house, she had been hearing of her mother, had been led back to her vague, childish memories of her. It had always saddened her to think of her mother, and now with that sorrow there was something else, something dark and dreadful. She looked and looked at that name on the window-sill until suddenly she turned and ran out of the room, shutting the door behind her. Tears were running down her cheeks; she was shaken to the soul by an emotion she could not comprehend.

"What is it?" she said to herself. "Oh, what is this…?"

## Chapter Eleven.
### Di Gets Another Letter

In her own room she bathed her eyes in cold water, and then went down by the front stairs to the kitchen. And her heart sank at the sight of Miles there, slouched in a chair, smoking a cigarette.

"How ill he looks!" she thought, shocked by his pallor, his haggardness.

He glanced up as she entered, without a smile, without a word.

"We'll eat in here," said Aunt Emma. "Get up, Miles, and bring your chair to the table."

He obeyed, still in silence, still smoking. Aunt Emma set on the table a savory little ham omelette, fried potatoes and a pot of tea; she seemed very pleased with her skill in cooking—and with reason—but she had, apparently, no ideas at all about attractive serving. They ate upon the bare table, from the coarse kitchen china.

Miles did not eat at all; Aunt Emma paid no attention to this; she sat at the end of the table with a pleased and cheerful expression upon her healthy face, but Di was troubled.

"Miles, do eat!" she said.

He pushed back his chair and rose.

"I can't," he said. "My head aches..."

"You can drive down to the drug-store," said Aunt Emma, "and get a little prescription filled for me. The fresh air will do you good. Take Diana with you."

The prospect of a drive with Miles was by no means pleasant, especially in his present condition.

"Let's walk instead," said Di.

"I can't," said Miles, briefly.

He began walking up and down the kitchen; then abruptly he stopped beside her chair.

"Di," he said. "*Won't* you come?"

She looked up at him; their eyes met, and she was dismayed by the anguish she saw.

"All right!" she said, with a sigh. "First let's help Aunt Emma—"

"The woman from the village will be here in half an hour," said Aunt Emma. "Run along! I don't need you."

Di went upstairs to get her hat and coat, went almost mechanically. Her mind felt blank, her heart numbed, as if she had exhausted her capacity for thinking and feeling. Only that sorrow stirred her as she passed the forbidden door, sorrow, formless as a dream.

"I'm tired," she thought. "I don't care very much now—about anything... I ought to do something about Uncle Rufus, though."

It was such an effort to think. Again she put on her hat, remembering with a sort of wonder how happy she had been this morning, thinking that at last she was free.

"I can't go," she thought, "until I'm sure that Uncle Rufus is getting proper care. He wants me here... Something horrible is going on, and I've got to stop it. And I've got a chance now... I can telephone from the drug-store. To whom?"

She could not think. Somebody must come now to help her. She must tell someone now—but who was there? Uncle Rufus had not a friend on earth and neither had she. There was no possible use in telling Mrs. Frick about this. Then who?

"Doctor Coat? No. He thinks Aunt Emma's a wonderful person. Mr. Purvis? He's a lawyer. If I tell him about the note—about the other things... It's got to be Mr. Purvis. When we go to the drug-store, I'll ring him up. I don't care if Miles hears me."

She came downstairs again, and found Miles waiting outside in the car.

"You'll drive carefully, won't you, Miles?" she asked.

"No," said Miles.

That was not a promising beginning. He started the car with a jerk and went down the hill at a reckless speed, swung round the corner and into the main road.

"Miles!" she cried. "You'll be arrested!"

"I don't care!" he answered.

"Miles! There's a policeman on a motor-cycle—"

That was a lie, but it checked him; he slowed down considerably.

"God!" he said. "I wish I had enough courage to crash into a wall and finish."

"Isn't that just a little inconsiderate?" she said.

"No," said Miles. "You'd be better off dead."

"I suppose I have something to say about that, though."

Now that he was driving more moderately, his wild talk did not very greatly disturb her. She had heard that sort of thing before. Her father, in his bad hours, had used to tell her gloomily it would have been better if she had never been born; he had used to say that life was no more than a curse. Even as a child, her native courage, her wholesome sanity, had rebelled against that, and she rebelled now. It might be that she herself had very little, but life was good. It was beautiful out here, in the Spring sun; there was a place for her in the world, work for her to do, happiness for her, somewhere, and for everyone.

"He's sick," she thought. "In body and mind. And I'm afraid I can't help him. I'm so tired—it's hard to think of anything at all to say."

But it was impossible for her not to try.

"Miles," she said. "Why don't you get a job?"

"What for?"

"You'd be much happier—"

He laughed, a theatrical and bitter laugh.

"You would!" she persisted. "I'm going back to New York presently to look for a job myself. And if you find something to do—we can have nice times together. We can have little dinners together, and go places…"

Even while she was speaking, she didn't believe in it; that cheerful, normal world outside had lost reality for her. But she went on, valiantly.

"We'll have such nice times… On Saturday afternoons we'll—"

"Di!" he cried. "You don't know…!"

"Yes, I do, Miles. You're—upset now. You're not feeling well. You don't see things as they really are. Why, Miles, think how young you are! Everything still before you—"

"If you knew—what was behind me!"

"It doesn't matter, Miles. If there's anything you're sorry for, or ashamed of—"

"Sorry for!" he cried. "Oh, God!"

"Then look ahead, Miles. Make up your mind that things will be different in the future."

"There's no possible future for me."

In her fatigue and depression, it seemed almost unendurable to be obliged to keep this up. But no one else would bother with Miles, no one else would try to help, and she could see how sorely he was in need of help.

"There is, Miles."

As he turned to look at her, the car swerved a little.

"Diana," he said. "Do you really care what happens to me?"

"Yes," she answered, promptly. "I do."

"Even if I've done something... something..."

"Yes, Miles," she said, steadily.

He turned the car to the side of the road and stopped it.

"Do you care enough—to save my life?"

"Of course," she said, uneasily.

"Then will you marry me?"

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Miles."

"Look here, Diana! I've got a little money—enough for us to get away somewhere... We'll go to South America, Di. I'll start all over again. I'll be anything you want, Di, I'll do anything you want, Di, Di, my darling! If you're with me, Di, I'll be all right! Di, I *can't* live without you!"

"You don't need to, Miles," she said. He had seized both her hands, and she made no attempt to withdraw them. She had to be careful now, very careful, if she was to help him. "Only, we've got to learn to know each other."

"I won't live without you!" he cried. "I won't try!"

"You're not going to be without me. We're going to see lots of each other—and have such good times together—"

"That won't do," he interrupted. "It's all or nothing. Either you'll marry me and come away with me—or—"

"Nothing of the sort, Miles," she said, almost sternly. "We're going to be the best of friends—"

"Will you marry me?" he demanded.

"Miles, I can't—"

He started the car again, driving not recklessly now, but steadily as if with a purpose.

"This isn't the way to the drug-store," she said.

"No," he said. "It's not. We're going somewhere else."

"Please tell me, Miles!"

He would not answer her; he drove on and on, through a little town, through pleasant roads lined with old trees and comfortable houses, past woods, past fields. His face was set and grim; there was certainly some purpose now in his tormented heart. Time and again she tried to divert him, but he would not answer her. And she grew afraid. Was this to be the end, a sickening crash, perhaps hours of suffering, and then death…?

"Miles!" she entreated. "Please stop! Please tell me where you are going?"

"To hell!" he shouted.

They shot up a hill, and he stopped the car. Beside them was a little bridge over a railway cut.

"There's a train coming now," he said. "When it's in sight, I'm going to jump."

"No, you're not!" she said, but he only laughed.

In despair she looked about her; there was not a living creature in sight, only the empty road, with a wood on one side and the bridge on the other. The distant train whistled.

"I shall try to hold you," she said. "If you—struggle—you may kill me, Miles."

"Then we'll die together," he said.

The sun was shining and the wind blew on this deserted hill-top. Again the train whistled. He got up, and she caught his coat-sleeve, but he was much stronger than she. He got out of the car, and she followed, pulling desperately, to prevent his setting foot on that bridge.

"You shan't!" she cried. "Miles! Miles! If you really do care for me one bit—"

The train was in sight. He tried to wrench himself free, but she flung her arms about him; he tried to push her away, but she twisted her foot round his ankle; he stumbled and fell on his knees. And she pressed down on his shoulders with all her might. The train went by, shaking the little bridge.

She thought then that she was going to faint; she stepped back a pace—and she saw, at her feet a letter that had fallen from his pocket. A letter addressed to herself. She stooped and snatched it up.

"Give that to me!" he cried.

She began to run.

She ran downhill, and she heard his footsteps on the hard road behind her. She ran faster, faster than she would have believed possible, with the strength of desperation. He was close behind her. Nothing about but the empty road.

"Stop!" he shouted.

She ran and ran. Nothing ahead but that straight road, and her strength was beginning to fail her now; her breath was coming in gasps; her laboring heart sent all the blood pounding in her ears. Then at the foot of the hill she saw the level crossing of the railway, and a little hut where the guard sat. He was looking at her now... Such a long way...

Her second wind came to her now; she quickened her pace; she stumbled and recovered herself, flew down the rest of the hill, to the doorway of the little shelter. She could not speak, only stand there, panting, facing the astonished old man. Then she turned her head; she saw Miles, a few paces distant, standing in the middle of the road. They looked at each other, a strange look, then he turned round and started up the hill again.

"Miles!" she called after him. But she was still breathless, her voice was faint, either he did not hear, or he did not care. She wanted to tell the old man to hurry, to save Miles, but she could not say a word.

"Sit down, Miss!" said the old man, pushing forward his chair.

She pointed after Miles, and half fell into the chair.

"All right!" said the man. "He won't bother you now, Miss. Just take it easy..."

"I'm afraid—" she gasped. "He'll kill..."

Just then she saw his car coming down the hill; he shot past the little shelter, across the tracks and out of sight.

"You young ladies had ought to be more careful who you go out with, these days," said the man. He was a solid, burly old fellow, with kindly eyes, beyond measure reassuring to her.

"But don't you worry any more," he continued. "He's gone and he won't come back, neither. He knows you've got a witness what could prove in a court of law how he was chasing you down the hill—"

"I was only afraid—he'd kill himself," she answered. "He's such a reckless—driver."

The old man obviously did not believe a word of that. He brought her a glass of water, and stood watching her while she drank it.

"Live near here, Miss?" he asked.

"No," she answered. "I... Perhaps I can get a taxi..."

"Ought to be some along in a few minutes," he said. "Going down to the station, to meet the up train. Next one I see, I'll stop it for you, if it's got a driver I know."

"You're awfully kind," she said.

"Pshaw!" said he.

She sat there in the doorway of the little shelter, with tranquil peace all about her; the railway tracks glinting like silver in the sunshine; she heard a robin singing nearby. And she held that letter tight in her hand. Someone in the world had been interested enough to write to her... There were, kind, ordinary human creatures; there were birds and sunshine...

"If you'll excuse me, I'll just read this letter," she said to the old man.

This politeness somewhat surprised him.

"Go right ahead!" he said, and stepped outside.

The envelope had no stamp, and it had been torn open; she took the letter out of it.

> "Dear Miss Leonard:
>
> "*I am bringing this along, in case anything prevents me from seeing you this evening.*
>
> "*I think the letter I brought you from Mrs. Frick will have explained me pretty well. I hope you won't think I am a meddlesome ass. But if you get this letter, it will mean that I have not been able to see you this evening, and that will be rather a bad job, because I am going to try every way I know to see you. There are a lot of things that need explaining. I don't want to put them into a letter. I shall try to give this to Wren, to give to you. When you get it, please try to trust me. Clear out of that house the first moment you can. Put on your hat and walk out. Don't say anything to anyone. If anyone comes along with you, go back to the house and try again. But get away. Take the first train back to New York, to Mrs. Frick's. Things are going to happen, and you must be out of the way.* This is important.
>
> "*I hope you will believe that ever since I saw you with those flowers I have been, and I always will be,*
>
> "*Faithfully and respectfully your friend,*
> "James Fennel."

It was as if she heard him speaking, in his blunt and somewhat masterful way, as if she could see his face, unexpressive, except when that vivid smile crossed it. He, a professional thief?

"I never really believed it!" she thought. "I knew...! I knew...!"

She could have wept, with delight, with relief. He was her friend. He would come back—

"But what happened to him that night?" she thought. And the greatest fear she had ever known in her life seized her. Why had he not been able to see her?—"That will be rather a bad job, because I am going to try every way I know to see you."—She had gone out, to meet him; she had waited... What had happened to him?

Now she remembered what Miles had said, his words that hinted at some desperate remorse. She had not paid much heed to them at the time; she had thought he referred to his drinking, to Heaven knows what episodes in his unhappy wasted life. She had not tried at all to account for his intention to kill himself; it had seemed so in keeping with his unstable, reckless nature. But now she could believe that there was something in his heart he could not endure. He had had Fennel's letter in his pocket...

"Here's a cab, Miss," said the old man. "And a driver I know, and can vouch for. Nice, steady young man."

She rose and managed to smile.

"You've been so nice—" she said. "Some day I'm coming back—to thank you. Only to-day—I'm—tired."

"That's right!" he said, seriously. "All upset. Well, you remember if you want a witness to these goings-on, here's Joe Archer, that seen it all."

She came out of the little shelter and found the taxi waiting. She glanced at the driver, a squat, swarthy young Italian, then she got in.

"Where to, lady?" he asked.

She looked at him, dazed; she needed time to think. Should she go back to Mrs. Frick's at once? Not back to The Châlet. Not there again...

"First I'd like to go somewhere to telephone, please," she said to the driver, and as the cab started, she took out her vanity-case, to see how she looked after all this. Angelina had given her that case.

"Oh, if only I could reach her!" she thought.

She had a vision of Angelina arriving at The Châlet, dashing up in a racing car, or arriving by airplane, sweeping in like a whirlwind, facing Aunt Emma with her sublime assurance.—"What do you

people think you're doing? Lord! What an awful old house! We'll have a doctor and a nurse for that poor old man. Where's Fennel? I'm going to look for him. I want to talk to that detective."

Angelina wouldn't care whether or not it was her business to interfere, or whether anyone wanted her. She would simply take possession of everything and everyone.

"Child, you're simply exhausted! Go and lie down this instant, you poor little angel, and I'll come up and have tea with you in your room."

She had said that so often; she had been, for all her sensational exploits, so strong, so confident, and, for all her carelessness, so generous and kind.

But it was not possible to reach her; the itinerary of her honeymoon was a secret.

"There never seems to be anyone but Mrs. Frick," thought Di.

The driver stopped at a little stationer's and she got out to telephone. It seemed a little impossible, that she could really communicate freely with the outside world; she half expected that there would be no answer to her call, or that someone would stop her.

But the usual routine went forward and she actually heard Mrs. Frick's voice; not very amiable.

"Well?"

"It's Diana Leonard—"

"Miss Leonard!" cried Mrs. Frick. "Merciful Powers! I've been so worried and anxious about you. Especially not hearing a single word from that Mr. Fennel. Where are you now? Are you coming back to-night?"

"What about Mr. Fennel?" asked Di.

"Why, he promised to come right straight back here after he'd seen you, and tell me all about things. And he never did. I rang up the Ritz, where he's living, and they said he hadn't come back. I didn't know if I ought to take any steps, but I thought I'd better not. Of course he has lots of friends. If anything was wrong, *they'd* know. But tell me, dearie, when are you coming back here?"

"I—don't exactly know," said Di. "But very soon, Mrs. Frick."

"But are you all right, dearie?" asked Mrs. Frick. "It seems to me your voice sounds sort of queer."

"Perfectly all right, thanks."

"Did you get the letter I sent by Mr. Fennel?"

There was a moment's pause.

"Yes, thanks. He gave it to me," said Di.

"I wish you'd come back!" said Mrs. Frick. "And I wish you'd tell me whatever has happened to Mr. Fennel."

"I'm—going to try to find out," said Di.

For she had made up her mind that she must go back to The Châlet at once.

# Chapter Twelve.
## "You Are Like Her"

She had come to this decision rapidly, but quite deliberately.

"No one there would do me any real harm," she thought. "They can't afford to, because they're hoping to get Uncle Rufus's money through me. Aunt Emma was going to make Uncle Peter apologize. She'll see that he doesn't do anything like that again. And if Miles comes back, she'll keep him in order. I've got to go back, and find out what's happened to Mr. Fennel."

She was perfectly sure that something had happened to Fennel, and that Miles was responsible for it; she was profoundly alarmed and troubled, yet in her heart there was still that unshakable confidence in Fennel. She could not imagine him defeated by Miles. He might have been deceived, sent away with some false message from herself; he might even have been taken by surprise, have been hurt, temporarily put out of the way. But if he had been deceived, he would soon find it out; if he had been hurt, he would recover. He would come back; she knew it.

Her chief motive was loyalty. Fennel had come entirely on her account; any misadventure that had befallen him was due to his wish to help her. And now she would help him.

"I can't very well go to the police," she thought. "I haven't any evidence that anything's happened. And Aunt Emma would know how to make things look all right. She called in that detective herself... I wish I'd kept that other letter—the one with the money in it. It was a forgery, of course. Who did it? Miles? Is that what he's so wretched about?"

It was so difficult to evaluate Mile's emotions. He was capable of being overcome with remorse for something pardonable, and equally capable of feeling not the least regret for some horrible act. His rudderless spirit knew no measure, no proportion; he did not know what he wanted or where he was going.

"If anyone had ever cared for him," she thought, "had ever taken any trouble over him, he might have been—a decent man."

And that, in a way, was her requiem for Miles. She had pitied him and had done what she could for him, and now she had finished with him.

The sun was beginning to set; another day was ending, and still she was not free. Going back there again…

"If you'll drive to the East Hazelwood Station," she told the chauffeur, "someone there can tell you how to reach a house called 'The Châlet.'"

It seemed to her a surprisingly long drive.

"But of course Miles came so terribly fast," she thought. "And perhaps he came a shorter way, too. Now I must make up my mind what to do."

She leaned back in the cab and shut her eyes, but, instead of the clearly defined plan she wanted, trivial and aimless little thoughts drifted through her mind.

"Paying for this taxi is going to make an awful hole in my ten dollars," she thought. "But Mrs. Frick's turned so amiable… He remembered that day he saw me on the steps of Angelina's house… He must be a friend of hers… He must have plenty of friends. He couldn't just disappear… But some people do… I've read in the newspapers…"

She opened her eyes and sat up straight.

"I know that he came that night. I must find out why I didn't see him. What happened to him? Miles knows. And almost certainly Aunt Emma knows. But if she won't tell me, if I can't find out anything, I shall have to go to the police."

She tried to marshal in her mind the facts she had to lay before the police. That letter that had fallen from Miles's pocket? That, combined with the fact that Fennel had disappeared, ought to be enough. But suppose he hadn't really disappeared, but had only gone somewhere about his own affairs? It was possible that Fennel had left that letter for her, had given it to Wren, and Miles had got hold of it. That might be his only offense, the purloining of a letter. His remorse, his wild talk, might so easily be without foundation. Suppose after all that nothing had happened to Fennel?

But there was that other letter she had had, signed with his name, enclosing the marked fifty-dollar bill. She was sure that letter was a forgery, done for the purpose of discrediting Fennel. Perhaps the whole story of the robbery was sheer fabrication, with Wren and Fennel the victims.

"I don't know!" she cried to herself. "I can't think it out. There are so many little things—that don't seem to fit together... Only there's something horribly wrong... And Mr. Fennel came that night, and I didn't see him."

She realized with dismay that she was not thinking clearly. She was worn out, almost exhausted by her terrible struggle with Miles, coming close upon the heels of so many other shocking and inexplicable things.

"If I could wait and rest—before I went back..." she thought. "Maybe it's simply idiotic to go back. But it seems to me now the only decent thing to do. Mr. Fennel came on my account. I ought at least to try to find out what happened. And now, of course, it's very different. I was—almost a prisoner before, but I've got out, and I'll take care not to be trapped again."

They were going up the hill now, along the woodland road. The sun was gone, the sky was drained of color; here among the trees there was a somber twilight. The Châlet was a house easy to get into, but not so easy to leave.

"I'll see to that!" she thought, and leaning forward, spoke to the driver.

"Please wait for me," she said. "And if I don't come out in half an hour, please go to the door and ask for me."

He turned round to look at her, and in the gathering dusk his swarthy face had, she thought, a strange, secret look.

"No!" she said to herself. "That's ridiculous..." And aloud: "Please —don't go away without me," she said. "No matter what anyone says... Even if someone comes out and pays you and says I'm not coming. I—I *am* coming..." She stopped, ashamed and half-frightened by the tremor in her voice, the unmistakable note of appeal. "You see," she said, "I've—left my bag there... I—they—they'd like me to stay longer—but I can't... So if you'll please wait..."

"Why don't yez leave me go and ask for yer bag?" he asked.

The kindness in his voice nearly unnerved her.

"Thanks ever so much, but I've—got to—go in."

"I'll wait," he said. "And if they won't leave yez come out, will I tell some friends of yours?"

"Yes!" she cried. "I'll give you an address—if you have a pencil."

He stopped the cab, halfway up the hill and not yet in sight of the house, and on a bit of paper she wrote Mrs. Frick's address.

"If you'll please let her know…"

Putting the paper in his pocket, he turned away again.

"Well…" he said. "Maybe they got a right to keep your bag, but they got no right to keep *you*. That's agin the law."

"Oh—" she began, and stopped. Evidently he thought this was an affair of unpaid board; better let him go on thinking that.

"I'll wait, aw' right," he added. "Don't you worry!"

But she did worry! As they turned the corner, and she saw the house again, so desolate, and bleak, such a fear swept over her that for a moment she was paralyzed.

"I can't!" she said, half aloud.

"What?" asked the driver.

"Nothing," she said, and tried to reason with herself.

There was nothing really to be afraid of; the cab would be waiting for her and the driver had Mrs. Frick's address. And even without that no one would want to hurt her, for only through her could they get Uncle Rufus's money.

"I'll tell Aunt Emma the whole thing," she thought. "How Miles acted and about Mr. Fennel's letter. I'll tell her that if she doesn't let me know at once what happened to Mr. Fennel, she needn't expect me to help her out with any money ever. I've got the upper hand. I *must* remember that."

Light was shining from the windows of the lounge. But all the other dark rooms…

"I have the upper hand!" she said to herself. "Perhaps I'm the only person who can find out what happened to Mr. Fennel. Perhaps they've done something—horrible…"

It was very easy to believe that, when she stood again in the shadow of that house.

"And Uncle Rufus!" she thought, with a shock. "I promised not to leave him!"

She stopped outside the door, appalled. How was it possible that she had forgotten that? For a moment, despair seized her. Then she began to think sanely and lucidly.

"I'll stand by him. I won't desert him. But I will not—I *cannot* live in that house. I must see him and explain it. There must be some sort of hotel in the village. I'll stay there, and come to see him every day until he's well enough to leave. I'll beg him to insist upon having a nurse for the nights. I'll do it all quite openly. I have the upper hand. I will not be cowardly. I will not be underhand and secret. I have the upper hand."

She glanced back at the cab that stood square and solid in the driveway, its lights shining out clearly. Then she opened the door and entered the lounge.

"Ah!" said a bland voice, and Mr. Purvis rose from his chair. "Miss Diana... We've been waiting for you!"

In her condition of nervous fatigue she was ready to believe even the respectable Mr. Purvis a sinister figure.

"Waiting for me?" she repeated.

"Sit down!" he said. "Yes... Yes... It is your uncle's wish that you should be informed... Yes... Your uncle sent for me again this afternoon, my dear young lady, and he has at last made his will... He wishes you to know—'So that she will stay here with me'—those were his words. He is leaving you practically his entire estate of seven hundred thousand dollars."

His pleased smile died on his lips.

"Are you ill?" he cried.

"No," she said, faintly. "Only, naturally... I... I want to see Uncle Rufus, please."

"Quite natural and proper!" said Mr. Purvis. "Perhaps I was somewhat too abrupt... And mind you, I don't by any means intend to suggest that your uncle's condition is worse. By no means! In fact —" He smiled almost archly, "it's a curious thing, but well attested—

that very often a patient takes a turn for the better after making a will. There's no cause for immediate alarm, my dear young lady. Doctor Coat assures me…"

"May I see him, please?" asked Di. "Uncle Rufus, I mean."

Because, before anything else, she must see that old man who had, in spite of his malice and unkindness, trusted her and so greatly rewarded her; she must assure him that she would return tomorrow morning; that she would look after him and protect him.

"I don't know…" said Purvis. "Your aunt and Doctor Coat are with him now. They may not think it advisable—"

"I'll just go up and see," said Di. And all the way up the stairs she said to herself: "I have the upper hand. I'll *insist* upon seeing him. And I'll say what I want to say. I'll see him alone. Aunt Emma wouldn't dare refuse, with Doctor Coat there."

As she reached the top of the stairs, she was startled to hear her aunt laugh, a low, cheerful chuckle, answered by another laugh, a man's. It seemed to her that this sound came from the corridor that branched off from the main one, and she went very quietly in that direction.

There they were, Aunt Emma and Doctor Coat; Doctor Coat leaning against the wall with his hands in his pockets, Aunt Emma standing facing him, smoking, looking up at him with a glance that was coquettish and gay.

"And what did you do then, Emma?" Doctor Coat was asking, with evident admiration.

"I told him that for every remark like that, the price of the article would increase one hundred dollars," said she.

Di turned away, astounded by this new aspect of Aunt Emma.

"But now's my chance!" she thought, hastening to Uncle Rufus's room.

The door was open, and Uncle Peter was sitting in there, half asleep. But at the sight of her he came wide awake in an instant.

"Hello!" he said, jauntily.

She looked past him, to the bed where the old man lay.

"Uncle Rufus!" she said.

"Come here!" he answered, in a voice so hoarse and faint she could scarcely hear it. She went toward the bed, but Uncle Peter sprang up and barred the way.

"Look here!" said Di. "I won't have this! Uncle Rufus wants to speak to me—and if you won't let him, I'm going to tell Doctor Coat and Mr. Purvis."

The room was lighted only by a small lamp with a green shade; outside that bright circle it was in darkness. Uncle Peter's face was little more than a pale blur, the old man on the bed was lost in the shadows.

"Stand out of the way, please!" she said.

"No!" said Uncle Peter.

"And what's this?" asked Aunt Emma's voice from the doorway, where she had appeared, with Doctor Coat.

At the sound of her voice, the old man on the bed half-raised himself.

"Don't go..." he said, in that hoarse, extinguished voice. "They'll kill me. Stay..."

He sank back, turned his head, still wearing the grotesque fez, to the wall, with the covers drawn up to his chin. Diana faced Doctor Coat.

"Did you hear?" she asked.

"Most unfortunate...!" he murmured.

She was indignant at so weak a word. She stepped out into the hall, where she could speak without Uncle Rufus hearing.

"Don't you see—?" she demanded, in a sort of despair.

"He doesn't 'see,'" Aunt Emma interrupted, and, addressing Doctor Coat: "I must warn you, Matthew, that Diana takes this all very seriously. I believe she's convinced that we're all engaged in a conspiracy—to murder Uncle Rufus Leonard."

"Come, come, Emma!" said Doctor Coat, shocked. "I'm sure she thinks nothing of the sort." He glanced at Di, and smiled; no doubt he meant it for a benign, and reassuring smile, but it was not; it was nervous, apprehensive. "The important point," he went on, "is that Rufus doesn't believe in this—this conspiracy himself. He's been

expressing these—unpleasant suspicions for years, yet he never stopped coming here. And only this afternoon, when I suggested moving him to a hospital, he refused. That is pretty conclusive proof that this is not a genuine delusion.

"Now, the most marked characteristic of the genuine delusion, such as can be observed in the paranoiac, for instance, is not the irrationality of the fixed idea, but the tenacity with which the patient clings to it. I emphatically deny that Rufus shows any symptoms of a genuine delusion. These—suspicions are simple willful assertions, made with the clear intention of annoying, as opposed to the perfectly involuntary belief of a paranoiac. I am willing at any time to testify to the fact that Rufus is of sound mind. A little crochety, perhaps, but as sane as you or me. He—"

"It's no use, Matthew!" Aunt Emma interrupted. "I'd like a word with her, if you'll excuse me. Come here, please!"

Di followed her into the next room; not until the door was closed behind them did she realize what room this was. It was almost in darkness; through the window she could see the pines black as ink against the pallid sky.

"I should like to prevent you from making any more of a fool of yourself than is necessary," said Aunt Emma. "Are you able to realize that if you persist in taking this notion of your Uncle Rufus's seriously you are tending to invalidate his will?"

"I don't care!" said Di. "I can't—I won't—see him—like this. He's—frightened."

"My God!" said Aunt Emma, with a sigh. "Very well! I'll admit that he's frightened. And that he had a genuine delusion. It's a well-defined case. He has the paranoiac delusion of persecution. Technically, he's insane. Like your father."

"My father!" cried Di.

"Like your father," Aunt Emma repeated. "*He* believed he was persecuted. He—"

"He wasn't insane!" cried Di. "That's not—"

"The stock is tainted," Aunt Emma went on, tranquilly. "You must have observed it. Peter's a high-grade moron. Rufus is a paranoiac. Miles, just at present, is a borderline case. But alcoholism will very

shortly send him over the line. A somewhat difficult household to deal with."

Di was silent for a moment.

"My father—" she began, in an unsteady, defiant voice.

"Naturally," Aunt Emma interrupted, "you want to deny that he was unbalanced. It's a quite instinctive reaction with you to deny anything that's unpleasant to you. It's time you faced facts with a little courage. This inclination of yours to build fantasies is dangerous. It was just that refusal to accept reality that destroyed your unfortunate mother."

"Don't—*talk* about her!" said Di.

"I think," said Aunt Emma, slowly, "that she'd be glad if I were to tell you now. It's time... I've kept it from you, until now, because you are so remarkably ill-adapted to hear any unpleasant truths. But now... Here, in this room..."

In this room? Where her mother's name was printed on the window-sill...

"I don't—want to hear..." she said.

"But you're going to hear," said Aunt Emma. "It was in this room that I last saw her alive. She came here, to me, in a lamentable condition. She had found out for herself what your father was. She realized that he could never make a living for her, and her own health was too much impaired for her to contemplate any sort of work. I was fond of Inez, but I had seen from the beginning that she was pitiably maladjusted. Like you, she was incapable of facing reality. Like you, she believed that she 'needed' things that do not exist. She demanded a love and loyalty from other people which is never given. She wanted to be 'happy.' You are like her."

Her voice stopped; the dark room was silent. Then in a moment she went on:

"She was in despair because she couldn't 'do anything' for you. She was perfectly convinced that she had been born for the express purpose of 'doing' things for other people. And because her ill-health made that impossible..."

Her strong fingers closed upon the girl's arm.

"Come here!" she said, and led her to the window. "She wrote her name, here, on the sill. It is too dark for you to see it, but her name is here. You see those three pines, standing together? That is where she died."

Diana could only look, with dilated eyes, at those three black trees.

"Here, from this spot where you are standing," said Aunt Emma, "she threw herself out of the window. Because she could not face life as it is."

Her grasp on the girl's arm relaxed.

"Now perhaps you understand," she said, "why I warned you against this room."

"No..." said Diana.

"You're like her," said Aunt Emma. "Too much—like her."

# Chapter Thirteen.
## A Will Is Made

Diana remained silent, motionless, infinitely withdrawn from the woman beside her. A measureless sorrow weighed upon her, something beyond the natural grief and pity she must feel at hearing the story of her mother's death. This was bleak, hopeless woe; it was as if she, too, had come to the end of all dear and pleasant things: before her lay the garden, somber, in the dusk; behind her the empty room, haunted by that poor spirit…

"Am I—like that?" she thought. "Not able to face life as it really is?… I've managed to get on—without very much, but I've always thought there was something better round the next corner… And suppose there isn't? Suppose there's never going to be any more for me—than this?"

Aunt Emma had said the stock was tainted. Was she, too, tainted with some fatal instability, some moral weakness that would leave her always friendless, poor, a failure? She had nothing—and from him who hath not, even that which he hath should be taken…

All the anxieties, the bewildered distress of her childhood, came back upon her now; her school-days, when she had been sent to one little private school after another, always trying to adjust herself, always aware that disastrous changes might come at any moment, never knowing that feeling of security and permanence so vital to a child. And as a young girl, there had been no dances, no pretty clothes, no good times; she had had to be her father's "pal," he had taken her with him where he wanted to go, had lived as it suited him.

Only those months with Angelina had been happy, in spite of the strange and varied duties. She had loved Angelina; she had been alive there, energetic, alert, gaining every day in self-confidence.

But evidently Angelina had not cared at all about her; she had gone off and forgotten Di.

"I don't think anyone could ever care much for me," she thought.

"Now!" said Aunt Emma's voice, startling her in her bitter reverie. "Don't stay in here any longer, Diana."

Di did not answer or move.

"Come!" said Aunt Emma. "For a suggestible mind, the scene of a tragedy is not wholesome. In a room like this. But never mind! Now that I have explained, I think you'll keep your ideas about Uncle Rufus to yourself. He's not legally competent to make a will—but it would be extremely difficult to prove that. There would be only your word against Doctor Coat and Purvis and myself and others. And the word of a hysterical person isn't worth much. No... He's done as he wanted to do with his money, and it's to your benefit. You need money more than an ordinary person would. You're not capable of earning your own living. You're hysterical and unstable, badly educated and trained."

Di listened to this without protest. Perhaps it was true... She thought of her mother, who had stood here, where she herself was standing; her mother who had found life too hard, and had put an end to it. Perhaps it had been dark, twilight, as it was now, and when she had died out there, under the pines, perhaps she had seen a sky like this, soft, merciful, with one silver star... And then had closed her eyes, and drifted away into peace... Death was beautiful and blessèd, and life was so hard... To close her own eyes and die—like her mother... She raised her eyes to the sky, and sighed...

Then, suddenly and sharply, something awoke in her; something that had brought her gallantly through all her young life. She straightened her shoulders, and sighed again, a long sigh, as if she were waking from a dream.

After all, it didn't matter whether life were hard or not, whether it were lonely and anxious.

"I don't have to be happy," she thought. "I've just got to do the best I can. I'm not down and out yet! I'll—"

There was a knock at the door.

"Emma!" said Uncle Peter's voice, apologetically. "There's a taxi-driver here, asking for 'a young lady.' Shall I pay him—?"

"No!" said Di. "He won't go, anyhow. I told him to wait."

"Very well!" said Aunt Emma. "Then you'd better go."

She crossed the room, and opened the door, and Di followed her.

"Please wait a moment, Aunt Emma!" she said. "I want to speak to you."

"Peter, tell the driver she'll be down in a few moments," said Aunt Emma. "Now!"

The door was open and the dim light in the corridor shone into the room. She heard Uncle Peter running down the stairs.

"Well?" asked Aunt Emma.

For a moment Di was silent, struggling with a too rapid flow of thoughts. As if that terrible depression had been actually a dream, she felt a little dazed. It was difficult to come back; to remember all at once…

But she knew now that the blackest hour of her life had passed, and that she had conquered some nameless, formless horror.

"I want to ask you—" she said, "where Mr. Fennel is."

"I'm sorry I can't tell you," Aunt Emma answered. "But no doubt the police will find him before very long."

"No. I don't believe that," said Di, briefly. "Something's happened to him."

"Is this a presentiment?" inquired Aunt Emma. "People of your type are very fond of presentiments and strange, occult feelings. Do you 'just *know*' that something's happened to Fennel?"

"It's not very occult," said Di. "I've got some pretty definite information."

"Then take it to the police," said Aunt Emma. "You'd better do that, anyhow. You'll feel easier. Tell the police that we've murdered Fennel. And Wren, too, isn't it? And that we are now engaged in murdering Uncle Rufus. And any others you feel worried about."

Diana reflected for a moment.

"She let that detective come and search the house. She's not afraid of the police. She feels sure that they can't find out. And what can I really tell them? There's no proof of any crime—anything having happened to Mr. Fennel. Only that letter, and that could be explained. I'm the only one who can find out. I have the upper hand. This is my chance. The taxi is waiting outside."

She chose her words with care.

"Aunt Emma," she said, "if I'm to have Uncle Rufus's money, and you want to share it, I'll have to know about Mr. Fennel."

"You've already promised me a share," said Aunt Emma. "But no doubt you are always able to find satisfactory justification for breaking your word."

Her cool contempt was having its usual effect, sapping the girl's self-confidence, making her feel weak, petty, contemptible.

"All right!" she said to herself, "I don't care! I'm going to see this through, anyhow." And aloud:

"I'll make a bargain with you," she said.

"I'm afraid," said Aunt Emma, "that making a bargain with you is rather uncertain."

"Then you *could* make a bargain?" said Di, quickly. "You *do* know what's happened to him?"

"That's quite intelligent!" said Aunt Emma, in a tone of pleased surprise. "You must be considerably interested in this man, to wake up so."

"I am," said Di.

"And what bargain do you propose?"

"If you'll tell me where he is and what happened to him, I'll sign some sort of paper, giving you a certain sum."

"Unfortunately you haven't a penny."

"When I get it."

"I'm sorry," said Aunt Emma, "but I'm afraid that won't quite do. A very short time ago you were moved by an impulse of gratitude to offer me a share of any money you might get. This gratitude has apparently evaporated now. You are now, as far as I can see, actuated by an infatuation for this man you scarcely know. If this infatuation should—not be requited, you would resent giving me anything. And you would no doubt find excellent reasons for repudiating this 'paper' you are always speaking of. I suppose that idea comes from your father. Probably he signed a good many 'papers' in his time."

"Very likely," said Di. "But I don't quite see..." She paused a moment, then she went on, deliberately. "You said you asked me here so that Uncle Rufus would take a liking to me and leave me his money. But if you can't trust my word, and it's no good signing a paper, how did you expect to get any of it?"

"Really," said Aunt Emma, "you have more intelligence than I gave you credit for."

"I'm just beginning to think..." said Di, half to herself.

It seemed to her of vital importance that she should think, that she should remain quiet and cool, unmoved by the elder woman's scorn, unconfused by the darkness gathering about her. She had no one but herself to depend upon now.

"I'd like to know," she said.

"I had," said Aunt Emma, "three well-considered plans for obtaining a share of that money. One of them has failed. But one of the other two will succeed."

"What is it?"

Aunt Emma did not answer, and looking at her, Di saw by the dim light an expression that horrified her. For those blue eyes were regarding her with a monstrous sort of pity, as one might look at the last struggles of a trapped animal.

"What are—your plans?" she asked.

"We'll leave that for the present," said Aunt Emma; "and discuss this bargain of yours. You wish to know what happened to Fennel. And I'm not at all disposed to tell you. He was a very unwelcome intruder. What's more, if I do tell you, I have no sort of guarantee that you won't go off and never communicate with me again."

"If you won't tell me," said Di, "I'm sure to do that."

"Perhaps it's better so," said Aunt Emma.

Di paid no attention to this fencing.

"What do you want me to agree to?" she asked.

"Whatever you agree to will have to be in public," said Aunt Emma. "Purvis is a lawyer—"

"But you don't want me to go to him and promise to pay you anything?"

"That would be somewhat crude," said Aunt Emma. "Even Purvis would find that—peculiar. After all, it's really your affair, to find some way of satisfying my not unreasonable demands without arousing suspicion. I am certainly entitled to some of that money. From any point of view. I am a nearer relation than you of Rufus Leonard. I should use the money in an excellent cause. And it is due to me alone that you are going to get it. I can't make you give me anything, and, apparently, the sole claim I have upon you is my knowledge of this Fennel's whereabouts. Naturally, I shall not relinquish my one advantage without excellent security."

"What do you suggest?"

"It's for you to suggest," said Aunt Emma. "I can think of nothing, except that you might make a will in my favor—"

"A—will? But—"

"Oh, I see the drawbacks to that perfectly well!" said Aunt Emma, with a frown. "In the first place, your Uncle Rufus may live for another five years. And in the second place, there's nothing to prevent you from making another will to-morrow. The only value would be, that you would be making a public declaration of your no doubt excellent intentions. If you were to declare, in the presence of Purvis and Coat that gratitude impelled you to assign me a share of your legacy, you'd hesitate, after that, to refuse me a loan, when you inherit. It's a very poor plan—for me. I hope you can think of a better one."

"I could tell Mr. Purvis that you'd lent money to my parents, and that I considered it my duty—"

"No, thanks!" said Aunt Emma. "That puts me in a very unpleasant light."

Di was silent, thinking this over in her own characteristic way. She was not cautious, not patient; she wanted to learn about Fennel in a hurry, and be gone. She was certain now that he had been sent away by some chicanery. An attempt had been made to discredit him in her eyes, and probably something had been done to make her seem contemptible to him. And she wanted to find him, and explain.

A new thought struck her, a thought that frightened her. Was it likely that Aunt Emma would willingly let her meet Fennel, to compare notes? He was not likely to let matters rest… No. Aunt Emma must somehow feel herself quite safe from any future interference on the part of Fennel. And what could make her feel safe?

"You—*promise* to tell me where he is?" she asked.

"If I don't," said Aunt Emma, "you can very easily destroy any paper you've signed, if my information doesn't suit you."

"That's true," thought Di. "Suppose I do make a will… She can't very well be planning to murder me. In the first place, as she said, Uncle Rufus is still alive, that Mr. Purvis and Doctor Coat are here, and the driver's waiting. Even if she tells me a lie, there's no harm done. I'll get away at once, and find some of his friends. And if she's lied, I'll destroy the will—make another… No… I don't see what possible harm it can do, to agree to that now. I want to hear what she has to say about Mr. Fennel."

She glanced up.

"All right!" she said. "I'll make a will. And you promise to tell me, as soon as I've done that?"

"I promise. But it's going to be very awkward for me. Purvis may refuse to draw up a will for you. And if he makes any objections, if he appeals to me, I shall certainly uphold him. I don't intend to appear in the light of a blackmailer, I assure you. You'll have to make your impulse plausible. And you'll have to assure him that I know nothing about it."

"All right!" said Di, again.

"And even when you've done that," said Aunt Emma, "the will won't be worth the paper it's written on. I'm obliged to trust you to deal honorably with me. I'm going to give you information that you can use against me. I admit that there was a certain amount of misrepresentation involved in getting Fennel away. I can count only upon whatever sense of honor you have to prevent any further trouble for me. And also upon your disinclination for a family scandal."

"Misrepresentation…" What had Fennel been told to make him go away?

"I must know," she thought; and aloud: "I'll see Mr. Purvis now—"

"I doubt if you can manage him," said Aunt Emma.

But Di, for all her honesty, her carelessness, was not without subtlety. She made up her mind to "manage" Purvis, and to manage quickly. And she did remarkably well. She found Purvis in the lounge, reading, and she went up to him with an air of urgency.

"Mr. Purvis!" she said. "I've got to go back to New York at once, and I don't want to leave this house until I've made a will."

"A will! But my dear young lady—!"

"Please let me!" she said. "Aunt Emma's my nearest relation. And she asked me here when it meant—a lot to me. I'd like to feel that if anything should happen to me—a train accident, or anything—"

"But my dear young lady, at the present time… Your Uncle Rufus is—is improving—"

"I know," she said. "But you never can tell what might happen. And I'd like to feel, before I go away, that I'd done that."

He began to argue. But Di maintained her attitude of an illogical and impulsive young creature, and that seemed to him perfectly natural. What is more, as the heiress of Rufus Leonard, she had a new importance to him.

And she was assisted by an interruption. There was a knock at the door, and when she ran to open it, the taxi-driver spoke.

"Everything aw' right?" he asked.

"Please keep on waiting!" she said, very low. "Don't go away, please. And if I'm not out in half an hour, please knock again and insist on speaking to me."

"*Aw*' right!" said he, in a reassuring whisper, and closing the door she turned to Purvis.

"My taxi's waiting!" she said, plaintively. "Please let me just dash off a will, leaving half the money to Aunt Emma. Even if it seems silly—I'd *like* to do it."

Mr. Purvis, like almost everyone else, was rendered nervous by the thought of a taxi-meter steadily ticking up a charge. He urged her to wait, to come to his office the next day and discuss the matter, but he was infected now with her sense of haste.

"I will come to your office," she said. "This is just temporary—just to make my mind easy before I go. Please help me! That meter must be running up terribly!"

Very reluctantly he yielded, and took out his fountain pen.

"Just please say that half of anything I get is to go to Aunt Emma —"

"And the rest—?"

"Oh... I don't know... To—Mrs. Frick."

"Who is Mrs. Frick?"

"Oh, what does it matter!"

"It does matter," said Purvis. "You don't realize what you're doing in the least. Who is this Mrs. Frick?"

"Oh, don't bother about her. Just say—my heirs and assigns—or whatever they are."

He argued again, and she became more and more obstinate.

"Well!" she said, with a sigh. "If you won't, then I'll have to find some sort of lawyer in the village, on my way to the train. I'm sure I have a legal right to make a will when I want."

"Yes," he said, shocked and distressed. "If you insist upon this—this most irregular and unreasonable proceeding. Your aunt—"

"Please don't tell her!" said Di. "Now!"

He drew up for her a brief will, leaving half of any estate of which she might be possessed to her aunt Emma Leonard, and the remainder to her legal heirs and assigns.

"I'll read it to you—"

"No, thanks, I'm sure it's all right. I'm in such a hurry—"

"I insist upon your reading it," he said, sternly. "You cannot sign a document you have not read."

So she read it, or pretended to read it.

"Now," he said. "We must have two witnesses. I'll get Doctor Coat and your Uncle Peter. And remember, young lady, you are coming to my office to-morrow, to discuss the matter."

As he began to mount the stairs, Di went to the window and looked out, the taxi stood there, its lights shining on the drive.

"Thank God for that taxi-driver!" she thought. "I'm not—cut off."

In a few minutes Mr. Purvis descended again, followed by Uncle Peter, very jaunty, and Doctor Coat.

"State in the presence of these witnesses the nature of the document you are signing," said Mr. Purvis, frigidly.

"This is my last will and testament," said Di.

And as she spoke those words aloud, she began to realize what she was doing. As she took the pen in her hand, it seemed to her that she was about to sign her own death-warrant.

## Chapter Fourteen.
### Miles Confesses

Doctor Coat signed, in a neat, small hand, and Uncle Peter added a scrawling, infantile signature.

"Will you keep it for me, please?" she said to Purvis. "Thank you all very much... Now, I'll just run up to say good-bye..."

She ran up the stairs, and found Aunt Emma in the upper corridor.

"It's done," she said. "Signed and witnessed. Now please tell me —"

"Coat's coming up!" said Aunt Emma. "I don't care to be found talking alone to you just now. Go down in the kitchen and ask Miles. He'll tell you all you want to know."

"I don't want—"

"Then you'll have to want," said Aunt Emma, and turning on her heel, walked into Uncle Rufus's room just as Doctor Coat's benevolent and stupid face appeared at the head of the stairs.

"I can't wait!" thought Di. "I mustn't be so cowardly about Miles. He can't make any trouble here, with Doctor Coat and Mr. Purvis in the house—and that driver out there. I'll go and ask him anyhow. And if he's—impossible, I'll insist upon Aunt Emma telling me at once. She can't get out of it. I can threaten to tell Mr. Purvis to tear up the will."

But she dreaded the thought of seeing Miles again.

"On the borderline," Aunt Emma had said, and alcoholism would soon send him across it. Was that true? Her father "technically insane," Uncle Rufus a paranoiac, Uncle Peter mentally deficient... all of them...? And she herself?

"I won't think about that now," she said to herself.

But she had thought of it, and the horrible shadow would not leave her. She went down the stairs and into the lounge, where Purvis and Uncle Peter stood talking together; she went past them without a word and into the dining-room that was in complete darkness.

"My last will and testament…"

"What have I done?" she asked herself, stopping halfway across the room. "I wish… I hadn't…"

But even here, through the window, she could see the lights of the waiting taxi, her link with the world outside. She went on, resolutely, pushed open the swing-door, went through the pantry and into the kitchen.

Miles was sitting on the edge of the table, smoking. He glanced at her as she entered, but he did not speak or move. He was white as chalk, and on his handsome, wasted face was a queer, blank look.

"Miles!" she said, in as matter-of-fact a way as she could manage.

But he did not answer.

"Miles," she said again. "Please tell me what happened to Mr. Fennel—"

He sprang to his feet, stood looking at her with dilated eyes.

"Aunt Emma said you'd tell me—" she went on, unsteadily.

Still he did not speak; she looked at him, and was appalled by the expression on his face.

Then suddenly anger flamed up in her.

"Miles!" she cried. "Stop—staring like that! Miles! Can't you talk like a human being…? I—I'm sick and tired of all this… Where's Mr. Fennel?"

"He's in hell!" shouted Miles.

She caught him by the arm and tried to shake him.

"Tell me!" she said. "I *will* know!"

"You'll never see *him* again," said Miles, with a laugh.

That laugh brought her to her senses. This was not the way to handle Miles. Her hand dropped from his arm; she drew a long breath and began, in a friendly, easy tone.

"Please tell me all about it, Miles. Aunt Emma told me to come and ask you."

"I can't!" he groaned.

"Yes, you can, Miles!"

He flung himself into a chair, and covered his eyes with his arm, a childish and pitiable gesture.

"Oh, Di!" he said. "Oh, Di!"

She laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Come on, Miles!" she said, encouragingly.

Evidently he was filled with remorse for whatever part he had played in this affair, and she was sorry for him. But no doubt he was exaggerating as usual; she would have to sift out the truth from his words.

"I didn't think—I *could* do *that*," he said, still with his eyes covered. "I didn't mean to... But it was because I love you so... She promised to help me. She said you'd marry me. And you would have loved me, if he hadn't come. You liked me at first. If he hadn't come..."

He let his arm fall, and looked up at her, with a sort of anguished bewilderment.

"That night when we cooked the dinner together, Di... That was the happiest hour I ever had in my life... Then when you went upstairs to dress, she told me she'd heard you promise to meet that fellow at nine o'clock, in the clearing... She said I could stop it. She told me she'd keep you in the house as long as possible, and I could meet him. I was to tell him that you and I were secretly married and ask him to lend us enough money to get away, and ask him to clear out for a few days—for your sake—so that no one could question him. She said that would disgust him with the whole show, and that if he thought *you* were mixed up in everything he'd simply drop it—anyhow, until you'd had a chance to get away... But when she couldn't keep you in the house—when you ran out like that, Di, I—couldn't stand it. To see you, hell-bent on meeting another man... I went after you. I only meant to stop you... But I missed you, in the dark. I couldn't find you... I went to the clearing, and I saw him standing there... He had heard me coming... I found I had Uncle Rufus's loaded stick in my hand. I don't remember taking it. I swear I had no idea of—of *that*—when I left the house... But when I saw him... Di, I didn't mean to do that! I swear I didn't!"

Her hand had fallen from his shoulder; she was leaning against the table, looking and looking at him.

"What—was it—that you did?" she asked.

"I only struck once, Di I swear it...! And then I heard someone coming down the hillside, and I dragged him back, among the trees. It was you...! Oh, God, Di! You called him! You sat down there—and waited for him—you called him again... And he was lying there, not ten yards from you... all the time..."

She stood as if frozen with horror. He was still speaking, but she could not hear.

"Lying there..." she thought. "When I called to him... Dead—*murdered*..."

Suddenly she caught Miles's sleeve.

"Miles!" she said. "No... Miles, perhaps it's not true... Miles, you're not—*sure*...?"

"I wish to God I wasn't!" he said. "After you'd gone, I tried... But he—was gone..."

"Gone?" she echoed, catching at any straw. "You mean disappeared?"

"No!" he said. "Disappeared...? No. He lay there. I didn't know what to do with—it... I thought—I'd go mad... I dragged him along—and pushed him into the old quarry... And—later... I went back again—and called him..." His hand covered hers that lay on his sleeve. "That's why I wanted to kill myself," he said. "But now—I don't care. They're sure to find him. I don't care. I'm ready—to go."

"No, Miles—" she protested, almost mechanically.

"I am, Di," he said. "I'll be glad to finish."

He rose, stood looking down at the ground, with a look somber and austere.

"She's told me, often enough, that I'm not to be trusted. And it's true. I've never done anything but harm. I never could. I'm ready for the police, whenever they come..."

"Aunt Emma will help you," she said, with the same mechanical kindness.

"She doesn't know what I've done. I'm not going to tell her. She'd get me out of it. There'd be more lies and lies and lies... And there's nothing ahead for me, Di. I've been thinking over—everything. My whole life... I've always done what she wanted. She was the only one who did anything for me. My father never had any money. She sent me to school and to college. I suppose she was good to me. But she always told me what a weak, good-for-nothing devil I was... It didn't help much... But she was right... Di, there in the wood, something—happened to me—something sprang up inside me... I'm not fit to live."

There was no instinct for revenge in the girl, no impulse to retaliate. The death of this wasted, broken boy could in no way compensate for the life he had taken; it could give her no possible satisfaction to see him punished. But she could not pity him. Not now. She was thinking of Fennel.

It seemed to her the greatest misfortune possible that she was never to know him better, never to see him again. It seemed to her as if the vital, the significant part of her own life had ended with him.

"He came to meet me," she thought. "If it hadn't been for me, he would be alive now."

Miles was still talking, but she did not listen. Nothing mattered at all now; there was no object, no motive left. She could not care what she did, or what happened to her. She wanted to get away, alone and think.

"Well... Good-by, Miles!" she said, with a polite little smile.

She was not even aware that she had interrupted him in the middle of a speech.

"Di..." he cried. "Where are you going?"

"I'm just going back to New York, Miles. I'm—tired."

"You're going to *leave* me, Di?"

"Miles," she said, with a sort of despair. "I've got to go. I—can't stand any more." As she turned away, the swing-door was pushed open, and Mr. Purvis entered.

"This taxi-driver insists upon speaking to you," he said, severely.

"I'll come—" she answered, and followed him into the lounge, where she found the driver standing with his back to the door.

"I'm coming," she told him, with that same polite little smile, and went toward the door.

"But—your bag?" he said.

"I don't care. I'll send for it later," she said.

"My dear young lady!" protested Purvis. "Surely you're going to say good-by to your uncle?"

Again she had forgotten Uncle Rufus. She was very reluctant to leave him like this, yet it seemed to her certain that if she went up those stairs, she would not easily come down again. She had her chance now to get away and she must take it.

"I'm coming back very soon," she said, and, indifferent to Purvis's shocked face, she followed the driver out of that accursed house. The Spring night was cool and fresh, she drew a deep breath.

"When I've had time to think," she said to herself, "I'll find some way to get him away from there. But I can't think just now."

The driver opened the door of the cab; she had her foot on the step, when a window on the floor above was opened and Doctor Coat's voice called, in a tone of severe indignation:

"Miss Diana! One moment, if you please! Your uncle wishes to speak to you for a moment!"

She began to cry. Fatigued and miserable tears, like a child.

"I—can't!" she called back.

But Doctor Coats had closed the window and retired, and she knew she had to go.

"Well, shall I keep on waiting?" asked the driver.

"Yes," she said, and once more entered that house. After all, Doctor Coat was upstairs, Mr. Purvis was in the lounge, the driver was waiting. Nothing could happen to her. And in any case, she could not refuse to hear what the old man had to say.

Once more she mounted those stairs to the dimly-lit corridor above, and went to Uncle Rufus's room.

But Doctor Coat was not there; the room was empty except for the old man lying on the bed with his face to the wall in the almost dark room. She went over to the bed.

"Uncle Rufus!" she said, softly.

He turned his head; she had a glimpse of something in his eyes that made her cry out. Then a hand pressed over her mouth, her wrists were caught behind her back. She struggled in vain, her wrists were tied, and her ankles; the hand over her mouth was supplanted in a flash by a handkerchief; she was jerked backward, someone lifted her feet, someone else her head.

It was Aunt Emma who held her bound ankles. She looked straight into those blue eyes. Then she was carried into the next room, laid on the bed; she saw Aunt Emma and Uncle Peter go out; she heard the key turn in the lock.

"The driver won't go away," she thought. "I must keep my head. I musn't..."

She felt the world slipping away from her, there was a roaring in her head, a swirling blackness before her eyes. It seemed to her that the handkerchief over her mouth was smothering her; she tried to raise her bound hands, and fainted.

* * *

Mrs. Frick... Someone was speaking of Mrs. Frick. She tried to call out, and realized that she was gagged. It was Aunt Emma speaking in the corridor outside.

"No. I don't know who this Mrs. Frick is. But if—she's a friend of the poor child's..."

"Well, then..." said Mr. Purvis's voice. "I'd better tell that chauffeur, eh? Tell him to communicate with this Mrs. Frick? Apparently she gave him the address."

"Yes," said Aunt Emma, with a sigh. "He'd better advise Mrs. Frick to come out here to-morrow and see the poor child. It's a little beyond me. I've knocked and knocked on her door, but she refuses to answer."

Doctor Coat's voice intervened.

"You don't think, Emma...? We ought to—er—force an entrance?"

"No..." said Aunt Emma, with hesitation. "I'm afraid that would make her worse... An hysterical condition like hers is only intensified by attention. It seems to me, Matthew, that if she's let alone, she'll come to her senses more quickly. But if you advise—"

"No," he said. "No, I agree with you, Emma. No... Most unfortunate..."

"I noticed," said Purvis's voice, "that she was distraught. As to that fantastic idea of making a will..."

"I'm sorry you humored her," said Aunt Emma gravely.

"Yes," said Doctor Coat, in the same grave tone. "A mistake, Purvis. She has this notion that she's responsible for her uncle's illness... Of course, in a way, she *is*. If she hadn't run off like that to meet this man..."

"Fortunately," said Aunt Emma, "Rufus seems to be doing very well. But it's quite possible, of course, that he may take a turn for the worse. And if he should, I'm afraid it would completely unbalance her... She'd believe she had practically killed him. I can only hope that this Mrs. Frick will take her away."

"You don't consider her... er—?" said Doctor Coat.

"Insane?" said Aunt Emma. "Not at all. She is uneducated, impressionable, childish. But no more insane than nine people out of ten. Her father encouraged her to believe in her own importance. She's capable of the most irrational actions, due to her faulty training and her lack of reasoning ability... If I had time and opportunity, I believe I could do a good deal with her. She's attracted to me—as you've noticed. But I have my hands full, just now. I shall be glad if this friend, this Mrs. Frick—will come and take her away to-morrow."

"Well!" said Purvis. "We'd better be going now, Emma. You'll let us know, of course, if poor Rufus is worse...? I'll explain to the driver then, that he's to notify Mrs. Frick, as she told him to do... Very unfortunate."

"Yes," Aunt Emma agreed. "But to-morrow morning when she finds her uncle improved, she may be more reasonable. Good-night, Matthew! Good-night, Sam!"

In desperation, in a passion of helpless anger, Di had struggled to call out, to make any sort of sound that would attract their attention. And, as she heard their answered "Good-night, Emma!" she deliberately rolled off the bed on to the floor, with a thud that made her dizzy.

"What's that?" asked Purvis.

"The children," said Aunt Emma. "They're in that room."

The faint squeaking of someone's shoes died away. For a few minutes there was absolute silence. Then Di heard voices below, in the driveway; the engine started, the door of the cab slammed, the tires crunched over the gravel. They were gone.

She had thought that nothing mattered, that she did not care what happened. But it was not so. Every valiant and healthy impulse of her soul rose in revolt against this ignominy, this defeat. She lay still, gathering her strength.

"Everything's come out just as she wanted it," she thought. "I've made my will. I've played into her hands perfectly... Now she thinks she'll get rid of me. She has some plan all made, of course... Well, it won't succeed! I'll do something. I'll find some way..."

She had read stories and seen pictures of people who escaped from bonds like hers, who freed themselves from more urgent dangers than this. And she tried; she tried to narrow one hand so that it would slip out of the bandage that held her wrists; tried to move her ankles. But she had never realized before how it hurt to have one's hands tied behind the back, or the pain of a gag. And worse than anything were the tides of panic fear that threatened her again and again, in this utter helplessness. She could not make a sound; she could not even sit up; her struggles had no other effect than to leave her panting, desperate, with a cold sweat on her forehead. She lay quiet again, in the dark room.

And then an appalling thought struck her.

If Aunt Emma were to profit by that will, not only must she herself die, but Uncle Rufus must die first. That will had condemned him to death, as surely as if she had sent a bullet through his head; perhaps even at this moment—

She remembered the utter terror she had seen in his eyes. First Fennel, and then this forlorn and helpless old man, both to die because she had made fatal errors…

She strained her ears, to catch any sound from that next room, and once more that panic desperation assailed her; she tugged wildly at her bonds, made strange stifled sounds that frightened her.

She did not know whether hours or minutes went by. There were periods when she was scarcely conscious, and other times when she reflected, with a cool, impersonal lucidity.

"If Aunt Emma's going to let Mrs. Frick come out here tomorrow, that means that she'll be ready for her. She couldn't possibly afford to let me talk to Mrs. Frick. She can't afford to let me go—after this. She doesn't mean to let me go… There's no one to help me. She can make Miles think and act as she pleases. Mr. Fennel's—gone… Wren's gone. Mr. Purvis and Doctor Coat will believe what she tells them. The taxi-driver's doing just what I told him to do—notifying Mrs. Frick. I've got to help myself."

But how?

"I don't know," she said to herself. "But I won't give up. I shan't struggle any more. I'll save my strength. I'll try not to think of what's happened…"

She made a gallant effort to remember poems she had learnt in school, to fill her mind with fine and beautiful thoughts. But while she repeated lines to herself, horrible images came into her mind: Uncle Rufus in his terror, Fennel at the bottom of that old quarry. Fennel, above all. She could see him so clearly, could recall the tones of his voice, his vivid smile.

The door opened, and a sturdy white figure stood before her, outlined against the dim light in the hall. She paused a moment, and then entering the room, screwed a bulb into the electric light socket and turned on the switch, closed and locked the door, and kneeling beside the girl, untied her hands.

Di gave a smothered scream of pain as her arms dropped to her sides and the blood began to circulate. Aunt Emma untied the twisted handkerchief that had cut so cruelly into the corners of her mouth, and that done, sat down on the edge of the bed.

"My God!" she said, with a sigh.

Her face looked drawn with weariness, its fresh color vanished; she sat staring at the ground.

"Miles has told me," she said. "What folly! What criminal folly! All my plans ruined..."

Di sat down in a chair, and tried with numb, clumsy fingers to untie her ankles.

"Everything ruined...!" Aunt Emma went on. "And I'm dragged, against my will, into a dangerous and repugnant course... I never forsaw this..." She sighed again. "It's too late now," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Uncle Rufus—?" asked Di, with dry, stiff lips.

"He doesn't really matter," said Aunt Emma. "It's you I'm thinking of. It's you I'm sorry for."

Her ankles freed, Di looked up, into that tired, middle-aged face, framed in gray hair. This could not be a criminal, a monster of duplicity and evil...

"Then—if you're sorry—" she began.

"I've never disliked you," Aunt Emma went on, indifferent to her words. "I hoped at first that you'd marry Miles. That was my first plan. That would have kept the money in my control. And it would have been a very good thing for him. But that failed. And now that you know what he's done... That's the end, of course."

"What—do you mean?" asked Di.

"Why, that you can't live," said Aunt Emma, sighing again. "And I'm sorry."

"Do you mean," asked Di, "that you're going to try to murder me?"

"There's nothing else I can do," said Aunt Emma.

They both spoke in ordinary, normal tones, sitting in that commonplace hotel bedroom, filled with the garish light of the unshaded bulb.

"You can't expect not to be found out," said Di. "Mrs. Frick will make inquiries. Even Doctor Coat and Mr. Purvis will ask questions."

"I think I've planned it pretty well," said Aunt Emma. "But I didn't come here out of mere wanton cruelty—to gloat over you, and so on. I'm really very sorry. Only, it's a question of my safety, the opportunity to go on with my work, against your life; and naturally... The idea of killing you is horrible to me. And no doubt to you, also," she added, politely. "I thought—I hope you'll take the way I shall suggest. It is as your mother did. It will look quite natural to outsiders. Coat and Purvis believe that you were filled with remorse for your uncle's condition. They'll see that when you heard of his death—"

"His death...?"

"You committed suicide," Aunt Emma went on. "I give you my word to make it as easy as possible for you. The ground out there slopes down pretty sharply. The chances are that it will be a fatal fall. But if it isn't, if you're injured and in pain, I'll attend to you immediately. I'll see that you don't suffer at all."

"And if I don't do that!"

"Well, you'll have to go out of that window," said Aunt Emma. "If you won't do it voluntarily there'll have to be a very unpleasant struggle." She rose. "Think it over!" she said. "Think of your mother in this room. She found that life wasn't worth living. And it isn't for you either. You're ineffectual, incompetent. You're of no value to anyone. There's nothing ahead of you but a lifetime of poorly paid work."

She unscrewed the bulb and put it in her pocket. Di made a rush for the door, but it shut in her face, and the key turned outside.

# Chapter Fifteen.
## A White Figure

She was free to move about now; to call for help if she wished; she was left quite undisturbed to make what plans she could for her escape.

And she could make none. It occurred to her to knock on the wall of Uncle Rufus's room, but she decided against it. It would either frighten the old man still more, or wake in him hopes that she saw no way to realize. Or perhaps he could no longer hear anything…

She would have done anything possible to help him, but she could think of nothing. There had been, in that talk with her aunt, something that robbed her of the last hope. Her death had been arranged in so cool and matter-of-fact a way; she herself was so utterly negligible; there was nothing in her aunt to which she could appeal.

If this were to be her last hour, she meant it to be a good one, undaunted by fear and weakness. She faced her danger with courage and dignity. She thought of all the happy moments she had had, of all the people who had been kind to her, with a regret that was almost impersonal. It seemed to her that the past was already immeasurably remote. She thought, above all, of Fennel.

Then her mind turned to her childhood, and she tried to remember her mother. Here, in this room, her mother had battled with despair and anguish, and had lost. The room seemed filled with that tragic presence. In the darkness, the daughter tried to recapture some childish memory of that face, that voice; she wanted to feel near to her mother. She wanted to understand how her mother could, of her own free will, have left her child.

Was it because, after all, life was not worth living?

"If she could come back, just for a moment," she thought. "If she could tell me why she wanted to die—and what she found—on the other side… How could she bear to leave me?"

Aunt Emma had said that some strange and disturbing thing lingered here... If only she could pierce the veil, could come closer to that presence...

"Mother..." she said, half-aloud.

She had no one else to love. It seemed to her that if her mother would draw near to her, and she could go—with her... It would be good to go...

Why not? Why wait for a horrible and futile struggle? Did not the very walls of this room whisper to her—"Life is cruel, and death is peace"—Why not go to her mother...?

She rose, and crossed the room to the open window. Here, on this very spot, her mother had last stood... Out there—

An awful fear choked her; her heart seemed to stop. For there, at the foot of the dark pines, lay a white figure.

"Mother!" she said, inaudibly.

Her mother had come back, to show her the way. One instant, and she could lie there too—

"Miss Leonard!" said a voice behind her.

She turned, to see a figure standing there in the dark. Another ghost... She opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came.

"Steady!" said the voice. "Steady, dear girl!"

His arm was about her shoulders, and she clutched his coat frantically.

"How can you come!" she whispered. "You were dead, too."

"Never was less so," he answered. "But come now. Let's get away."

"How—could you come?"

"I found the kitchen door open, and I saw the back stairs, and came up them. I didn't know where you'd be, or whether I'd be—welcome. But I saw this door locked, with the key outside. Didn't want to knock, you see, so I walked in."

"He said—he killed you."

"His mistake, whoever he was. I was knocked out for a while. Then I found myself lying in a quarry, and I got up and came out. I went to a doctor—but I only told him I'd been in an accident. I

haven't told the police or anyone. I wanted to see you first. I'd have come before, but—I was a little—bothered by that whack I got. Now let's clear out."

"No! We can't leave Uncle Rufus without—"

"Uncle Rufus!" he repeated. "But look here! You needn't worry about *him*."

"I do! You don't know—"

"I know one thing," he said. "The poor old fellow was dead when we carried him in—"

"No! He's—there—in the next room..."

"He's dead," said Fennel. "I'm sorry if I'm—blunt, but—"

"Come and see!" she cried. "If it's not too late."

"Wait a minute! I—you see, I don't exactly understand what's going on here. And I'm sure you don't. That's why I didn't call in any outside help. I wanted to know first how much you're—involved in this."

"I don't know exactly what you mean."

"I mean," he said, "have you promised to conceal anything—given any sort of help—done anything that could get you in trouble with the law?"

"I—don't know," she said, doubtfully. "I don't think I have."

"Good!" he said, "Then we don't care how much of a row we raise, do we?"

"But if I had—?" she asked.

"Then I'd have had to get you away quietly."

"But did you think I might have done something—wrong?"

"No," he said, "Nothing wrong, and nothing silly. But you might have made a mistake. And there's something going on here. When we carried the poor old fellow in, I saw that he was dead. But your aunt behaved as if he were alive. That's why I wanted to see you that evening. I wanted to tell you, and get you out of the way before the big break. Now it's too late. Now you'll have to be mixed up in it."

"I did do one thing. I made a will. You see, Uncle Rufus had left his money to me, and I made a will leaving half of it to Aunt Emma."

"How did she work that?"

Di hesitated a moment.

"I wanted to find out what had happened to you. We made a bargain—"

"I see!" he said, and was silent for a moment. Then he took his arm from about her shoulders and moved away a little.

Everything he did was right, every action, every word of his was perfectly clear to her; she knew how he felt about things; she knew that he understood her. His quiet acceptance of the situation had steadied her, made her feel resolute and safe.

"The trouble is," he said, "that there are three men here, and my wrist's broken—"

"Oh!" she cried.

"It'll mend. But we'll have to manage carefully. Somehow we ought to get a look at the man in the next room. I want you to be able to swear that he's not your uncle... I'll just take a cautious survey."

He went over to the door, but he did not open it. She came to his side.

"I *was* a fool!" he said. "When I unlocked the door, I left the key there. And now we're locked in."

For a moment they were silent.

"What about the window?" he said. "You were looking out when I came in—"

"Oh, it was horrible!" she cried. "I thought I saw something... I was nervous..."

They went together to the window—and it was still there, that white figure.

"Do you—see it?" she whispered.

"Yes," he said.

"I thought—it was my mother. She—died like that. She—fell from this very window..."

He reached for her hand and held it.

"No way to get out of here," he said. "Can you shoot?"

"Shoot?"

"I have an automatic, but I can't do much with my left hand."

"I never even saw one, except in the movies," she said. "And I'm afraid—I *couldn't* shoot anyone—even if I knew how."

"Of course you couldn't," he said. "I was only thinking of shooting the lock, so that we could get out."

"I'll try it."

"I'm afraid it would—"

Something fell past them, something like a great white bird and struck the ground with a terrible thud, and did not move.

And from the next room came a scream.

"My child! You've killed my child…! Let me *go*…! My child…"

"It's Wren!" cried Di.

"Stand here!" said Fennel. "You can see the white doorknob. Stand close—there. Aim just below the knob. Pull the trigger."

The noise dazed her. And in the next room that wild voice was still shouting; some article of furniture was overturned with a crash.

"Try again!" said Fennel's quiet voice beside her. "Not so high."

Again a stab of flame and the crash of the shot, and the splintering of wood.

"Too low!" said Fennel. "Now! This time you'll do it."

She aimed with desperate care, tried to steady her shaking hand. Her finger was on the trigger, when there came a yell from the next room.

"Help! Help! Murder!"

The shot went wild.

"Last bullet," said Fennel. "Never mind, dear. You've splintered the wood. I'll see if I can kick through that panel."

"Help!" yelled that voice.

"We're coming, Wren!" she called, with all her strength.

Fennel gave the door a well-directed kick; a second.

Then another shot sounded, there was a cracking, tearing sound, and Fennel collapsed on the floor.

"What happened?" she cried. "Oh, what's the *matter*?"

"Stand away from that door!" he shouted.

But she was on her knees beside him. She spoke to him, but he did not answer. All noise had ceased in the next room, all noise everywhere had ceased; there was a silence that seemed to ring in her ears.

"James!" she said.

"Yes?" he answered, in his ordinary, composed voice.

"What's happened to you?"

"I got a bullet in the leg," he said. "Through the door."

She was passionately determined to be as quiet, as cool as he; she *must not* disappoint him.

"What can I do for you?" she asked.

For answer he laid his head back against her shoulder, and she began to stroke his forehead.

Outside the pines stirred in the breeze, and far away a dog barked and a motor horn sounded.

"I must get him to a doctor," she thought.

They were locked in this room. And God knows who or what was in the corridor outside. Even if she could get out, how was she to leave him alone in this horrible house while she went for help? He might be bleeding to death, dying here, now, with his head against her shoulder. No one knew they were here. No one would come.

"James," she said, "can you move?"

"I—can," he answered, "but—I don't care much about moving—just now..."

"I'll bring the chair for you to lean against," she said. "I want to look around."

She pushed the chair so that he was propped up against it, and then she stood behind, in the dark, and tried to think. Other people had escaped from situations like this... She could not make a rope of sheets, to lower herself from the window, for there was only a mattress on the bed.

"If I threw out the mattress," she thought, "and then jumped... If I missed it, if I hurt myself, he'd be worse off than ever. Perhaps I can kick the door panel in..."

She had an unconquerable aversion to making any more noise. But it must be tried. She had started forward, when a sound outside made her jump. Was it possible…? She went to the window; her glance fell indifferently upon the two white figures that lay there; she strained her ears to catch that sound again.

No doubt about it; a car was coming up the hill.

"This way, please!" she called. "*Please* come here! Please come here! This way! I need help! Please—!"

Her light young voice seemed to float off on the breeze; there was no answer. Now she could see the glare of the headlights as the car turned the corner.

"Please come here!" she cried, desperately. "This way!"

"My darling child!" called back a strong, beautiful voice. "What *are* you doing?"

"Angelina!" she cried. "Don't go away!"

The car had stopped and Angelina sprang out, and ran along the path. She stopped suddenly, and bent over the white figure lying there.

"What's this?" she cried.

"Angelina! Get in somehow—"

A man had got out of the car, and stood beside Angelina, looking up at the window.

"Come in!" cried Di, in a fury of impatience. "There's someone hurt here. I'm locked in. Hurry up!"

They both disappeared round the corner of the house, and for a long time she heard nothing.

"James!" she said. "Could anything happen to them…?"

"Nothing can happen to Angelina," he said.

Then she heard voices outside, Angelina's voice. The key turned in the lock, the door was flung open, the light of an electric torch shone in her face.

"James is hurt," she said, in a quiet, dignified voice.

And that was the end of her strength.

## Chapter Sixteen.
### "It's Over"

She opened her eyes to look into the face of Doctor Coat, who was bending over her. She stared up at him in wonder; he gazed back at her with an expression so unutterably woebegone that her heart sank.

"James…?" she asked.

"The young man? Doing very nicely," he answered. "And how are *you* feeling now?"

She forgot to answer him. She was looking about the shabby little old-fashioned room where she lay on a sofa; the chairs ranged against the walls, the ancient magazines upon the center table, evidently Doctor Coat's waiting-room. Then at last she was really out of that house…

"What happened?" she asked.

But Doctor Coat turned away his head.

"Oh, please tell me!" she cried, alarmed, and, as he turned back to her, she saw tears in his eyes.

"I have known Emma since she was a child," he said. "I can scarcely grasp this… I… find this… very hard… to credit…"

She was sorry for him, but, in her anxiety, she could not spare him.

"Please tell me about Wren!" she said.

"Now, my dear Miss Diana!" he said, with a pitiable attempt at professional cheerfulness, "put off your questions until you've had a good rest. To-morrow—"

"I can't wait—a minute! It'll make me much worse, not to know. Is Wren—?"

"It's horrible!" he cried. "Unbelievable! A holocaust…"

He began to pace up and down his shabby, brightly-lit little room, intolerably stirred, filled with bewilderment and grief.

"Three dead!" he said.

"Who? Oh, if you'd just please tell me! Can't you see…?"

"Yes, I can," he said. "Only, it's so difficult... I haven't quite grasped it yet... They sent a chauffeur for me, and I went... I hadn't been warned in any way. I thought of course it was Emma who had sent for me... I went to Rufus's room—and I found Wren there, dying from the effect of a murderous assault made upon him; he said by Peter Leonard... By Peter Leonard... Even then I didn't understand. I looked about the room for Emma and there was no one present but this chauffeur in uniform. He heard Wren's last statement...

"No one will ever believe us—Purvis and me. In court—we shall appear—either fools—or knaves... But it isn't hard to deceive people who are utterly unsuspicious. No doubt I am very much to blame. I never examined the patient. I saw him only in a darkened room, heavily muffled. But he had always had that peculiar habit of muffling himself. If there was anything strange about his voice or manner, I attributed it to his illness... I—I *couldn't* have suspected that Rufus was dead, buried in the cellar, with no more ceremony than a dog, and that the man I had seen in his place was Wren. It's the sort of thing that—doesn't occur to anyone... He had had similar attacks and Emma understood the treatment of them...

"When Emma told me he wanted to make a will in your favor, I was pleased. I was always fond of your mother—"

"Did you know how she died?" the girl interrupted.

"Why, yes, my dear. Typhoid."

"What makes you think that?"

He looked at her in surprise.

"I saw her the week before—the end. She was in the hospital then, and on the road to recovery, we all believed. Then she had a relapse —Don't cry! Don't cry, my dear!"

He drew a chair up beside the sofa, and sitting down, patted her shoulder.

"Don't cry!" he said. "It was a very happy end. She always had the greatest confidence in your father. She was sure he was going to make a fortune for you. A happy life, my dear, and a happy death."

She could not stop weeping; tears were streaming down her face; she groped for a handkerchief, and he gave her one of his own.

"You're *sure*?" she asked.

"Absolutely! Come, come!"

"Just—don't pay any attention—to this," she said. "Go on telling me..."

"I've sent for Purvis," he went on. "It will be a terrible blow for him... Rufus, or the man we thought was Rufus, was apparently too weak to talk. Purvis drew up the will in the form Emma said he wanted. He had not enough strength to sign his name, but he made his mark which we both witnessed... How could we suspect anything wrong? Emma did not benefit in any way; she was not even mentioned in the will. And later on, when you insisted upon making a will in her favor, we saw nothing amiss. We thought you were grateful to her, and perhaps a little—overwrought... Why did you make that will?"

"I'll tell you later. Please go on!"

"Wren was able to tell us only the main facts of this—this imposture. Emma had forced him into it by threatening to send his child to an institution. He said he agreed... He had rebelled against helping to bury poor Rufus, and in the end had had a physical encounter with Peter in which Peter had badly wounded his foot with a spade. I saw that wound... Emma told him that if he would impersonate Rufus for a few days, until the will was made, he would then pretend to recover and could start to return to Rufus's place in New York, and could disappear on the way. He believed her—then, and he had been promised a large reward. He had planned to take his child to some doctor he had heard of in Switzerland. But he was well aware that his life was in danger. He felt that as long as you were in the house, they would not dare to make away with him. He had the highest opinion of your courage and intelligence—the greatest faith in your kindness. The fact that he was making a will in your favor was a great comfort to him. They had told him that he would be allowed to leave to-day. A number of persons, yourself and Purvis and I among them, would have seen him take the train to New York, with his cap and muffler and so on. Then in the waiting-room at the Grand Central, he would have removed the disguise. And in order that nothing should happen to you, when you got this

money, he had written you a letter, explaining everything. He was very anxious that you should enjoy this fortune. But unluckily, Emma found that letter…

"I don't know whether in any case he would have been allowed to leave the house. I—am afraid not. I am afraid that I should have signed a death certificate without any proper examination… And looking back upon it now, I think… But that's too horrible!"

"You mean I was to die, too?"

"She told Purvis and myself that you were brooding over your responsibility for your uncle's attack of illness, and that she found you had suicidal tendencies… I *cannot* credit this…! I have known Emma since she was a child…"

"She's gone?"

"She and Peter."

"But Miles?"

"We found Miles—dead—in the dining-room. He had shot himself."

"Oh," she cried. "If he'd only known!"

"Known what?"

"He thought that he had done some—committed a dreadful crime—but he hadn't. If I could have told him!"

"His troubles are over, my dear," said Coat, and was silent for a moment. Then he went on:

"Perhaps the most shocking part of this whole terrible affair—to me—was the part played by those unfortunate children… I have never particularly interested myself in mental cases, and I took it for granted that Emma was giving them the best possible treatment. She was not. She had made no effort whatever to ameliorate their condition. She used them, in the most callous and unethical way, for her experiments. I don't mean that they were physically ill-used. Simply, she took advantage of their misfortune for her own ends. She withheld any treatment that might have helped them. Wren told me this. I don't know how he came to suspect it—"

"One of the children was his?"

"Yes. Emma had come across the child, and had offered to adopt it and give it proper care and treatment. And the wretched man had acted as an unpaid servant for years, in the belief that he was benefitting his child. Your friend did a very beautiful thing."

"What friend—did what?"

"Mrs. Blessington. He wished to see the body of his child. And found it was not his child, but the other one. And Mrs. Blessington made him a solemn promise that she would look after his daughter, would take her to the best specialists, would do everything humanly possible. It was the greatest possible comfort to him in his last moments."

"That's like her," said Di. "And the other poor little thing was dead?"

"That disaster is inexplicable to me. Near where the child fell, we found a peculiar object, a sort of dummy in a white dress... Fennel thinks that the child saw this from the upper window, and in some way was influenced by the suggestion. But I don't know... Perhaps at the inquest..."

He rose hastily, and crossed the room, stood by the window with his back to her.

"I can't tell you—" he said, unsteadily, "how sorry I am that you will have to be dragged into this—horrible thing. The innocent to suffer for the guilty... But there is no escape for you—or for any of us. The publicity will be merciless... I only hope to Heaven that Emma will not be found and brought back. I—should find it—very painful—to appear as a witness—against my old friend... As it is, we shall come out badly, Purvis and I..."

She lay still, thinking of that. It was not over; she had not escaped. Every detail of this monstrous crime, every smallest action of her own, would be made public. She would be an important witness in an incredibly sensational case, she would be examined, cross-examined, re-examined, all her words would be printed in the newspapers, she would have to endure the most hateful and shameful publicity. All her life, people would remember—"Yes—the one who was mixed up in that murder case." It seemed to her that,

when she had crossed the threshold of that house, she had left normal, cheerful life behind her forever. That shadow could never lift.

"And now—how are you feeling?" asked Doctor Coat. "The effects of such a shock—"

To his surprise, she rose to her feet.

"I feel perfectly all right," she answered. "What ought I to do? Tell the police?"

"Fennel has looked after that."

"I've dragged *him* into it," she thought. "He's not only been wounded—twice—but he'll have to be a witness, too."

She tried to consider what to do now. In the circumstances, it wouldn't be fair to go to Mrs. Frick's. Reporters would come, and the police... Hadn't she read of "material witnesses being kept in prison"? She didn't care. If she were not in prison, what could she do? It would be impossible to get a job now... She would be a notorious character. She might even be suspected of complicity.

"Mrs. Blessington waited to take you back to New York," Doctor Coat continued, "but I said I feared you couldn't stand the journey. However, you seem so much better than I expected—shall I call her in?"

"She's here?"

"Waiting in the next room. I should be glad to see you go with her. A very kind and generous woman..."

He opened the door into another room, and Angelina hastened in; she was pale, but radiant as usual.

"My dearest Di!" she cried. "Put some powder on your precious nose and let's get going!"

"Will I be allowed to go? I mean—the police—?"

"My dear, James can do *anything* with the police."

"Did you know him well, Angelina?"

"But my dear! He's my *brother*! You *must* have heard me talking about 'Jammy.' He's a marvelous person. He's written books, my dear, about reptiles. And he's just come back from a trip up the Amazon, looking for boa-constrictors and things. The police will eat

out of his hand. And of course they're frightfully impressed with Porter's money. I made a statement!" she added, with relish. "I'll be in the newspapers to-morrow morning—with one of my photographs. We told them you were *much* too ill to be questioned to-night, but they'll be around early to-morrow morning. So come along and get a good night's rest."

"Come—where?"

"My dear, some fearful woman told Jammy that you left my house without a penny, and then I remembered... And both Jammy and Porter went for me. I admit that I was a vile beast. But why didn't you remind me, darling?"

She put her arm about the girl and kissed her.

"I'm going to make up for it, every way I know!" she said. "Porter and I are going to give you the most *peerless* wedding-present—"

"I'm not thinking of getting married," said Di, with a faint smile.

"Oh, James told me!" said Angelina. "He wants the engagement announced before the trial."

"Angelina! No!"

"My dear, you must! Think how romantic—in the newspapers."

"Angelina, you can't see anything—romantic—in this terrible affair—"

"Darling," said Angelina, earnestly, "you haven't done anything awful, have you?"

"No. But think of the publicity—"

"Well, what of it?"

"Don't you realize how—disgraceful and—"

"My dear—chump," said Angelina, "you can't be disgraced by things that other people have done. You're trying to act like these people in French novels, when everybody has to commit suicide and break off their engagements because some member of the family has 'disgraced the name.' It *will* be trying and painful for you, but you are no more disgraced than if you'd been in a shipwreck. And you've got James and Porter and me to stand by you."

"Angelina, you don't understand—"

Then for the first time, Di could realize that Angelina was Fennel's sister. Across her radiant dark face came a look very like him, cool, steadfast and grave.

"Di," she said. "You've come to the crisis. You've been through fear and suffering and horror. And you've come through with courage and honesty. James told me. He thinks there never was anyone like you. Now look!"

She drew the girl to the window, and pulled aside the doctor's prim little curtains. The moon was going down behind a hill, the sky was still bright with the soft radiance; the Spring night was alive with exquisite promise.

"It's an awfully big world," said Angelina. "And it's so beautiful. You're just coming out of a horrible black hole. And now you've got to forget. It's all over. Now you've got to go forward."

"She's right, my dear!" said Doctor Coat's voice behind them.

"And now come on!" said Angelina, quickly dropping her serious air. "James is in the darlingest little hospital here, and we'll come out to see him to-morrow. Porter's waiting in the car. We're going to drive back to New York now—and eat. You look hideously thin. Come on, Di! It's over! We're all sorry for the terrible things that have happened—but they're done. James will be all right in a week or so. And you're going to be *happy*. Come on, Di!"

[The End]

# Colophon

Dark Power
Elisabeth Sanxay Holding

Source edition: 1930

Pipcub Editions