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**Course Title :** *The Golden Slipper*, by Anna Katherine Green/ “Problem iv: The Grotto Spectre” – 1915 (1)

1. Read the short story together
2. Interpret and discuss the text

*The Golden Slipper*, by Anna Katherine Green/ “Problem iv: The Grotto Spectre” – 1915

Miss Strange was not often pensive — at least not at large functions or when under the public eye. But she certainly forgot herself at Mrs. Provost’s musicale and that, too, without apparent reason. Had the music been of a high order one might have understood her abstraction; but it was of a decidedly mediocre quality, and Violet’s ear was much too fine and her musical sense too cultivated for her to be beguiled by anything less than the very best.

Nor had she the excuse of a dull companion. Her escort for the evening was a man of unusual conversational powers; but she seemed to be almost oblivious of his presence; and when, through some passing courteous impulse, she did turn her ear his way, it was with just that tinge of preoccupation which betrays the divided mind.

Were her thoughts with some secret problem yet unsolved? It would scarcely seem so from the gay remark with which she had left home. She was speaking to her brother and her words were: “I am going out to enjoy myself. I’ve not a care in the world. The slate is quite clean.” Yet she had never seemed more out of tune with her surroundings nor shown a mood further removed from trivial entertainment. What had happened to becloud her gaiety in the short time which had since elapsed?

We can answer in a sentence.

She had seen, among a group of young men in a distant doorway, one with a face so individual and of an expression so extraordinary that all interest in the people about her had stopped as a clock stops when the pendulum is held back. She could see nothing else, think of nothing else. Not that it was so very handsome — though no other had ever approached it in its power over her imagination — but because of its expression of haunting melancholy,— a melancholy so settled and so evidently the result of long-continued sorrow that her interest had been reached and her heartstrings shaken as never before in her whole life.

She would never be the same Violet again.

Yet moved as she undoubtedly was, she was not conscious of the least desire to know who the young man was, or even to be made acquainted with his story. She simply wanted to dream her dream undisturbed.

It was therefore with a sense of unwelcome shock that, in the course of the reception following the programme, she perceived this fine young man approaching herself, with his right hand touching his left shoulder in the peculiar way which committed her to an interview with or without a formal introduction.

Should she fly the ordeal? Be blind and deaf to whatever was significant in his action, and go her way before he reached her; thus keeping her dream intact? Impossible. His eye prevented that. His glance had caught hers and she felt forced to await his advance and give him her first spare moment.

It came soon, and when it came she greeted him with a smile. It was the first she had ever bestowed in welcome of a confidence of whose tenor she was entirely ignorant.

To her relief he showed his appreciation of the dazzling gift though he made no effort to return it. Scorning all preliminaries in his eagerness to discharge himself of a burden which was fast becoming intolerable, he addressed her at once in these words:

“You are very good, Miss Strange, to receive me in this unconventional fashion. I am in that desperate state of mind which precludes etiquette. Will you listen to my petition? I am told — you know by whom —"(and he again touched his shoulder) “that you have resources of intelligence which especially fit you to meet the extraordinary difficulties of my position. May I beg you to exercise them in my behalf? No man would be more grateful if — But I see that you do not recognize me. I am Roger Upjohn. That I am admitted to this gathering is owing to the fact that our hostess knew and loved my mother. In my anxiety to meet you and proffer my plea, I was willing to brave the cold looks you have probably noticed on the faces of the people about us. But I have no right to subject you to criticism. I—”

“Remain.” Violet’s voice was troubled, her self-possession disturbed; but there was a command in her tone which he was only too glad to obey. “I know the name” (who did not!) “and possibly my duty to myself should make me shun a confidence which may burden me without relieving you. But you have been sent to me by one whose behests I feel bound to respect and —”

Mistrusting her voice, she stopped. The suffering which made itself apparent in the face before her appealed to her heart in a way to rob her of her judgment. She did not wish this to be seen, and so fell silent.

He was quick to take advantage of her obvious embarrassment. “Should I have been sent to you if I had not first secured the confidence of the sender? You know the scandal attached to my name, some of it just, some of it very unjust. If you will grant me an interview to-morrow, I will make an endeavour to refute certain charges which I have hitherto let go unchallenged. Will you do me this favour? Will you listen in your own house to what I have to say?”

Instinct cried out against any such concession on her part, bidding her beware of one who charmed without excellence and convinced without reason. But compassion urged compliance and compassion won the day. Though conscious of weakness,— she, Violet Strange on whom strong men had come to rely in critical hours calling for well-balanced judgment,— she did not let this concern her, or allow herself to indulge in useless regrets even after the first effect of his presence had passed and she had succeeded in recalling the facts which had cast a cloud about his name.

Roger Upjohn was a widower, and the scandal affecting him was connected with his wife’s death.

Though a degenerate in some respects, lacking the domineering presence, the strong mental qualities, and inflexible character of his progenitors, the wealthy Massachusetts Upjohns whose great place on the coast had a history as old as the State itself, he yet had gifts and attractions of his own which would have made him a worthy representative of his race, if only he had not fixed his affections on a woman so cold and heedless that she would have inspired universal aversion instead of love, had she not been dowered with the beauty and physical fascination which sometimes accompany a hard heart and a scheming brain. It was this beauty which had caught the lad; and one day, just as the careful father had mapped out a course of study calculated to make a man of his son, that son drove up to the gates with this lady whom he introduced as his wife.

The shock, not of her beauty, though that was of the dazzling quality which catches a man in the throat and makes a slave of him while the first surprise lasts, but of the overthrow of all his hopes and plans, nearly prostrated Homer Upjohn. He saw, as most men did the moment judgment returned, that for all her satin skin and rosy flush, the wonder of her hair and the smile which pierced like arrows and warmed like wine, she was more likely to bring a curse into the house than a blessing.

And so it proved. In less than a year the young husband had lost all his ambitions and many of his best impulses. No longer inclined to study, he spent his days in satisfying his wife’s whims and his evenings in carousing with the friends with which she had provided him. This in Boston whither they had fled from the old gentleman’s displeasure; but after their little son came the father insisted upon their returning home, which led to great deceptions, and precipitated a tragedy no one ever understood. They were natural gamblers — this couple — as all Boston society knew; and as Homer Upjohn loathed cards, they found life slow in the great house and grew correspondingly restless till they made a discovery — or shall I say a rediscovery — of the once famous grotto hidden in the rocks lining their portion of the coast. Here they found a retreat where they could hide themselves (often when they were thought to be abed and asleep) and play together for money or for a supper in the city or for anything else that foolish fancy suggested. This was while their little son remained an infant; later, they were less easily satisfied. Both craved company, excitement, and gambling on a large scale; so they took to inviting friends to meet them in this grotto which, through the agency of one old servant devoted to Roger to the point of folly, had been fitted up and lighted in a manner not only comfortable but luxurious. A small but sheltered haven hidden in the curve of the rocks made an approach by boat feasible at high tide; and at low the connection could be made by means of a path over the promontory in which this grotto lay concealed. The fortune which Roger had inherited from his mother made these excesses possible, but many thousands, let alone the few he could call his, soon disappeared under the witchery of an irresponsible woman, and the half-dozen friends who knew his secret had to stand by and see his ruin, without daring to utter a word to the one who alone could stay it. For Homer Upjohn was not a man to be approached lightly, nor was he one to listen to charges without ocular proof to support them; and this called for courage, more courage than was possessed by any one who knew them both.

He was a hard man was Homer Upjohn, but with a heart of gold for those he loved. This, even his wary daughter-in-law was wise enough to detect, and for a long while after the birth of her child she besieged him with her coaxing ways and bewitching graces. But he never changed his first opinion of her, and once she became fully convinced of the folly of her efforts, she gave up all attempt to please him and showed an open indifference. This in time gradually extended till it embraced not only her child but her husband as well. Yes, it had come to that. His love no longer contented her. Her vanity had grown by what it daily fed on, and now called for the admiration of the fast men who sometimes came up from Boston to play with them in their unholy retreat. To win this, she dressed like some demon queen or witch, though it drove her husband into deeper play and threatened an exposure which would mean disaster not only to herself but to the whole family.

In all this, as any one could see, Roger had been her slave and the willing victim of all her caprices. What was it, then, which so completely changed him that a separation began to be talked of and even its terms discussed? One rumour had it that the father had discovered the secret of the grotto and exacted this as a penalty from the son who had dishonoured him. Another, that Roger himself was the one to take the initiative in this matter: That, on returning unexpectedly from New York one evening and finding her missing from the house, he had traced her to the grotto where he came upon her playing a desperate game with the one man he had the greatest reason to distrust.

But whatever the explanation of this sudden change in their relations, there is but little doubt that a legal separation between this ill-assorted couple was pending, when one bleak autumn morning she was discovered dead in her bed under circumstances peculiarly open to comment.

The physicians who made out the certificate ascribed her death to heart-disease, symptoms of which had lately much alarmed the family doctor; but that a personal struggle of some kind had preceded the fatal attack was evident from the bruises which blackened her wrists. Had there been the like upon her throat it might have gone hard with the young husband who was known to be contemplating her dismissal from the house. But the discoloration of her wrists was all, and as bruised wrists do not kill and there was besides no evidence forthcoming of the two having spent one moment together for at least ten hours preceding the tragedy but rather full and satisfactory testimony to the contrary, the matter lapsed and all criminal proceedings were avoided.

But not the scandal which always follows the unexplained. As time passed and the peculiar look which betrays the haunted soul gradually became visible in the young widower’s eyes, doubts arose and reports circulated which cast strange reflections upon the tragic end of his mistaken marriage. Stories of the disreputable use to which the old grotto had been put were mingled with vague hints of conjugal violence never properly investigated. The result was his general avoidance not only by the social set dominated by his high-minded father, but by his own less reputable coterie, which, however lax in its moral code, had very little use for a coward.

Such was the gossip which had reached Violet’s ears in connection with this new client, prejudicing her altogether against him till she caught that beam of deep and concentrated suffering in his eye and recognized an innocence which ensured her sympathy and led her to grant him the interview for which he so earnestly entreated.

He came prompt to the hour, and when she saw him again with the marks of a sleepless night upon him and all the signs of suffering intensified in his unusual countenance, she felt her heart sink within her in a way she failed to understand. A dread of what she was about to hear robbed her of all semblance of self-possession, and she stood like one in a dream as he uttered his first greetings and then paused to gather up his own moral strength before he began his story. When he did speak it was to say:

“I find myself obliged to break a vow I have made to myself. You cannot understand my need unless I show you my heart. My trouble is not the one with which men have credited me. It has another source and is infinitely harder to bear. Personal dishonour I have deserved in a greater or less degree, but the trial which has come to me now involves a person more dear to me than myself, and is totally without alleviation unless you —” He paused, choked, then recommenced abruptly: “My wife”— Violet held her breath —“was supposed to have died from heart-disease or — or some strange species of suicide. There were reasons for this conclusion — reasons which I accepted without serious question till some five weeks ago when I made a discovery which led me to fear —”

The broken sentence hung suspended. Violet, notwithstanding his hurried gesture, could not restrain herself from stealing a look at his face. It was set in horror and, though partially turned aside, made an appeal to her compassion to fill the void made by his silence, without further suggestion from him.

She did this by saying tentatively and with as little show of emotion as possible:

“You feared that the event called for vengeance and that vengeance would mean increased suffering to yourself as well as to another?”

“Yes; great suffering. But I may be under a most lamentable mistake. I am not sure of my conclusions. If my doubts have no real foundation — if they are simply the offspring of my own diseased imagination, what an insult to one I revere! What a horror of ingratitude and misunderstanding —”

“Relate the facts,” came in startled tones from Violet. “They may enlighten us.”

He gave one quick shudder, buried his face for one moment in his hands, then lifted it and spoke up quickly and with unexpected firmness:

“I came here to do so and do so I will. But where begin? Miss Strange, you cannot be ignorant of the circumstances, open and avowed, which attended my wife’s death. But there were other and secret events in its connection which happily have been kept from the world, but which I must now disclose to you at any cost to my pride and so-called honour. This is the first one: On the morning preceding the day of Mrs. Upjohn’s death, an interview took place between us at which my father was present. You do not know my father, Miss Strange. A strong man and a stern one, with a hold upon old traditions which nothing can shake. If he has a weakness it is for my little boy Roger in whose promising traits he sees the one hope which has survived the shipwreck of all for which our name has stood. Knowing this, and realizing what the child’s presence in the house meant to his old age, I felt my heart turn sick with apprehension, when in the midst of the discussion as to the terms on which my wife would consent to a permanent separation, the little fellow came dancing into the room, his curls atoss and his whole face beaming with life and joy.

“She had not mentioned the child, but I knew her well enough to be sure that at the first show of preference on his part for either his grandfather or myself, she would raise a claim to him which she would never relinquish. I dared not speak, but I met his eager looks with my most forbidding frown and hoped by this show of severity to hold him back. But his little heart was full and, ignoring her outstretched arms, he bounded towards mine with his most affectionate cry. She saw and uttered her ultimatum. The child should go with her or she would not consent to a separation. It was useless for us to talk; she had said her last word. The blow struck me hard, or so I thought, till I looked at my father. Never had I beheld such a change as that one moment had made in him. He stood as before; he faced us with the same silent reprobation; but his heart had run from him like water.

“It was a sight to call up all my resources. To allow her to remain now, with my feelings towards her all changed and my father’s eyes fully opened to her stony nature, was impossible. Nor could I appeal to law. An open scandal was my father’s greatest dread and divorce proceedings his horror. The child would have to go unless I could find a way to influence her through her own nature. I knew of but one — do not look at me, Miss Strange. It was dishonouring to us both, and I’m horrified now when I think of it. But to me at that time it was natural enough as a last resort. There was but one debt which my wife ever paid, but one promise she ever kept. It was that made at the gaming-table. I offered, as soon as my father, realizing the hopelessness of the situation, had gone tottering from the room, to gamble with her for the child.

“And she accepted.”

The shame and humiliation expressed in this final whisper; the sudden darkness — for a storm was coming up — shook Violet to the soul. With strained gaze fixed on the man before her, now little more than a shadow in the prevailing gloom, she waited for him to resume, and waited in vain. The minutes passed, the darkness became intolerable, and instinctively her hand crept towards the electric button beneath which she was sitting. But she failed to press it. A tale so dark called for an atmosphere of its own kind. She would cast no light upon it. Yet she shivered as the silence continued, and started in uncontrollable dismay when at length her strange visitor rose, and still, without speaking, walked away from her to the other end of the room. Only so could he go on with the shameful tale; and presently she heard his voice once more in these words:

“Our house is large and its rooms many; but for such work as we two contemplated there was but one spot where we could command absolute seclusion. You may have heard of it, a famous natural grotto hidden in our own portion of the coast and so fitted up as to form a retreat for our miserable selves when escape from my father’s eye seemed desirable. It was not easy of access, and no one, so far as we knew, had ever followed us there.

“But to ensure ourselves against any possible interruption, we waited till the whole house was abed before we left it for the grotto. We went by boat and oh! the dip of those oars! I hear them yet. And the witchery of her face in the moonlight; and the mockery of her low fitful laugh! As I caught the sinister note in its silvery rise and fall, I knew what was before me if I failed to retain my composure. And I strove to hold it and to meet her calmness with stoicism and the taunt of her expression with a mask of immobility. But the effort was hopeless, and when the time came for dealing out the cards, my eyes were burning in their sockets and my hands shivering like leaves in a rising gale.

“We played one game — and my wife lost. We played another — and my wife won. We played the third — and the fate I had foreseen from the first became mine. The luck was with her, and I had lost my boy!”

A gasp — a pause, during which the thunder spoke and the lightning flashed,— then a hurried catching of his breath and the tale went on.

“A burst of laughter, rising gaily above the boom of the sea, announced her victory — her laugh and the taunting words: ‘You play badly, Roger. The child is mine. Never fear that I shall fail to teach him to revere his father.’ Had I a word to throw back? No. When I realized anything but my dishonoured manhood, I found myself in the grotto’s mouth staring helplessly out upon the sea. The boat which had floated us in at high tide lay stranded but a few feet away, but I did not reach for it. Escape was quicker over the rocks, and I made for the rocks.

“That it was a cowardly act to leave her there to find her way back alone at midnight by the same rough road I was taking, did not strike my mind for an instant. I was in flight from my own past; in flight from myself and the haunting dread of madness. When I awoke to reality again it was to find the small door, by which we had left the house, standing slightly ajar. I was troubled by this, for I was sure of having closed it. But the impression was brief, and entering, I went stumbling up to my room, leaving the way open behind me more from sheer inability to exercise my will than from any thought of her.

“Miss Strange” (he had come out of the shadows and was standing now directly before her), “I must ask you to trust implicitly in what I tell you of my further experiences that fatal night. It was not necessary for me to pass my little son’s door in order to reach the room I was making for; but anguish took me there and held me glued to the panels for what seemed a long, long time. When I finally crept away it was to go to the room I had chosen in the top of the house, where I had my hour of hell and faced my desolated future. Did I hear anything meantime in the halls below? No. Did I even listen for the sound of her return? No. I was callous to everything, dead to everything but my own misery. I did not even heed the approach of morning, till suddenly, with a shrillness no ear could ignore, there rose, tearing through the silence of the house, that great scream from my wife’s room which announced the discovery of her body lying stark and cold in her bed.

“They said I showed little feeling.” He had moved off again and spoke from somewhere in the shadows. “Do you wonder at this after such a manifest stroke by a benevolent Providence? My wife being dead, Roger was saved to us! It was the one song of my still undisciplined soul, and I had to assume coldness lest they should see the greatness of my joy. A wicked and guilty rejoicing you will say, and you are right. But I had no memory then of the part I had played in this fatality. I had forgotten my reckless flight from the grotto, which left her with no aid but that of her own triumphant spirit to help her over those treacherous rocks. The necessity for keeping secret this part of our disgraceful story led me to exert myself to keep it out of my own mind. It has only come back to me in all its force since a new horror, a new suspicion, has driven me to review carefully every incident of that awful night.

“I was never a man of much logic, and when they came to me on that morning of which I have just spoken and took me in where she lay and pointed to her beautiful cold body stretched out in seeming peace under the satin coverlet, and then to the pile of dainty clothes lying neatly folded on a chair with just one fairy slipper on top, I shuddered at her fate but asked no questions, not even when one of the women of the house mentioned the circumstance of the single slipper and said that a search should be made for its mate. Nor was I as much impressed as one would naturally expect by the whisper dropped in my ear that something was the matter with her wrists. It is true that I lifted the lace they had carefully spread over them and examined the discoloration which extended like a ring about each pearly arm; but having no memories of any violence offered her (I had not so much as laid hand upon her in the grotto), these marks failed to rouse my interest. But — and now I must leap a year in my story — there came a time when both of these facts recurred to my mind with startling distinctness and clamoured for explanation.

“I had risen above the shock which such a death following such events would naturally occasion even in one of my blunted sensibilities, and was striving to live a new life under the encouragement of my now fully reconciled father, when accident forced me to re-enter the grotto where I had never stepped foot since that night. A favourite dog in chase of some innocent prey had escaped the leash and run into its dim recesses and would not come out at my call. As I needed him immediately for the hunt, I followed him over the promontory and, swallowing my repugnance, slid into the grotto to get him. Better a plunge to my death from the height of the rocks towering above it. For there in a remote corner, lighted up by a reflection from the sea, I beheld my setter crouched above an object which in another moment I recognized as my dead wife’s missing slipper. Here! Not in the waters of the sea or in the interstices of the rocks outside, but here! Proof that she had never walked back to the house where she was found lying quietly in her bed; proof positive; for I knew the path too well and the more than usual tenderness of her feet.

“How then, did she get there; and by whose agency? Was she living when she went, or was she already dead? A year had passed since that delicate shoe had borne her from the boat into these dim recesses; but it might have been only a day, so vividly did I live over in this moment of awful enlightenment all the events of the hour in which we sat there playing for the possession of our child. Again I saw her gleaming eyes, her rosy, working mouth, her slim, white hand, loaded with diamonds, clutching the cards. Again I heard the lap of the sea on the pebbles outside and smelt the odour of the wine she had poured out for us both. The bottle which had held it; the glass from which she had drunk lay now in pieces on the rocky floor. The whole scene was mine again and as I followed the event to its despairing close, I seemed to see my own wild figure springing away from her to the grotto’s mouth and so over the rocks. But here fancy faltered, caught by a quick recollection to which I had never given a thought till now. As I made my way along those rocks, a sound had struck my ear from where some stunted bushes made a shadow in the moonlight. The wind might have caused it or some small night creature hustling away at my approach; and to some such cause I must at the time have attributed it. But now, with brain fired by suspicion, it seemed more like the quick intake of a human breath. Some one had been lying there in wait, listening at the one loophole in the rocks where it was possible to hear what was said and done in the heart of the grotto. But who? who? and for what purpose this listening; and to what end did it lead?

“Though I no longer loved even the memory of my wife, I felt my hair lift, as I asked myself these questions. There seemed to be but one logical answer to the last, and it was this: A struggle followed by death. The shoe fallen from her foot, the clothes found folded in her room (my wife was never orderly), and the dimly blackened wrists which were snow-white when she dealt the cards — all seemed to point to such a conclusion. She may have died from heart-failure, but a struggle had preceded her death, during which some man’s strong fingers had been locked about her wrists. And again the question rose, Whose?

“If any place was ever hated by mortal man that grotto was hated by me. I loathed its walls, its floor, its every visible and invisible corner. To linger there — to look — almost tore my soul from my body; yet I did linger and did look and this is what I found by way of reward.

“Behind a projecting ledge of stone from which a tattered rug still hung, I came upon two nails driven a few feet apart into a fissure of the rock. I had driven those nails myself long before for a certain gymnastic attachment much in vogue at the time, and on looking closer, I discovered hanging from them the rope-ends by which I was wont to pull myself about. So far there was nothing to rouse any but innocent reminiscences. But when I heard the dog’s low moan and saw him leap at the curled-up ends, and nose them with an eager look my way, I remembered the dark marks circling the wrists about which I had so often clasped my mother’s bracelets, and the world went black before me.

“When consciousness returned — when I could once more move and see and think, I noted another fact. Cards were strewn about the floor, face up and in a fixed order as if laid in a mocking mood to be looked upon by reluctant eyes; and near the ominous half-circle they made, a cushion from the lounge, stained horribly with what I then thought to be blood, but which I afterwards found to be wine. Vengeance spoke in those ropes and in the carefully spread-out cards, and murder in the smothering pillow. The vengeance of one who had watched her corroding influence eat the life out of my honour and whose love for our little Roger was such that any deed which ensured his continued presence in the home appeared not only warrantable but obligatory. Alas! I knew of but one person in the whole world who could cherish feeling to this extent or possess sufficient will power to carry her lifeless body back to the house and lay it in her bed and give no sign of the abominable act from that day on to this.

“Miss Strange, there are men who have a peculiar conception of duty. My father —”

“You need not go on.” How gently, how tenderly our Violet spoke. “I understand your trouble —”

Did she? She paused to ask herself if this were so, and he, deaf perhaps to her words, caught up his broken sentence and went on:

“My father was in the hall the day I came staggering in from my visit to the grotto. No words passed, but our eyes met and from that hour I have seen death in his countenance and he has seen it in mine, like two opponents, each struck to the heart, who stand facing each other with simulated smiles till they fall. My father will drop first. He is old — very old since that day five weeks ago; and to see him die and not be sure — to see the grave close over a possible innocence, and I left here in ignorance of the blissful fact till my own eyes close forever, is more than I can hold up under; more than any son could. Cannot you help me then to a positive knowledge? Think! think! A woman’s mind is strangely penetrating, and yours, I am told, has an intuitive faculty more to be relied upon than the reasoning of men. It must suggest some means of confirming my doubts or of definitely ending them.”

Then Violet stirred and looked about at him and finally found voice.

“Tell me something about your father’s ways. What are his habits? Does he sleep well or is he wakeful at night?”

“He has poor nights. I do not know how poor because I am not often with him. His valet, who has always been in our family, shares his room and acts as his constant nurse. He can watch over him better than I can; he has no distracting trouble on his mind.”

“And little Roger? Does your father see much of little Roger? Does he fondle him and seem happy in his presence?”

“Yes; yes. I have often wondered at it, but he does. They are great chums. It is a pleasure to see them together.”

“And the child clings to him — shows no fear — sits on his lap or on the bed and plays as children do play with his beard or with his watch-chain?”

“Yes. Only once have I seen my little chap shrink, and that was when my father gave him a look of unusual intensity,— looking for his mother in him perhaps.”

“Mr. Upjohn, forgive me the question; it seems necessary. Does your father — or rather did your father before he fell ill — ever walk in the direction of the grotto or haunt in any way the rocks which surround it?”

“I cannot say. The sea is there; he naturally loves the sea. But I have never seen him standing on the promontory.”

“Which way do his windows look?”

“Towards the sea.”

“Therefore towards the promontory?”

“Yes.”

“Can he see it from his bed?”

“No. Perhaps that is the cause of a peculiar habit he has.”

“What habit?”

“Every night before he retires (he is not yet confined to his bed) he stands for a few minutes in his front window looking out. He says it’s his good-night to the ocean. When he no longer does this, we shall know that his end is very near.”

The face of Violet began to clear. Rising, she turned on the electric light, and then, reseating herself, remarked with an aspect of quiet cheer:

“I have two ideas; but they necessitate my presence at your place. You will not mind a visit? My brother will accompany me.”

Roger Upjohn did not need to speak, hardly to make a gesture; his expression was so eloquent.

She thanked him as if he had answered in words, adding with an air of gentle reserve: “Providence assists us in this matter. I am invited to Beverly next week to attend a wedding. I was intending to stay two days, but I will make it three and spend the extra one with you.”

“What are your requirements, Miss Strange? I presume you have some.”

Violet turned from the imposing portrait of Mr. Upjohn which she had been gravely contemplating, and met the troubled eye of her young host with an enigmatical flash of her own. But she made no answer in words. Instead, she lifted her right hand and ran one slender finger thoughtfully up the casing of the door near which they stood till it struck a nick in the old mahogany almost on a level with her head.

“Is your son Roger old enough to reach so far?” she asked with another short look at him as she let her finger rest where it had struck the roughened wood. “I thought he was a little fellow.”

“He is. That cut was made by — by my wife; a sample of her capricious willfulness. She wished to leave a record of herself in the substance of our house as well as in our lives. That nick marks her height. She laughed when she made it. ‘Till the walls cave in or burn,’ is what she said. And I thought her laugh and smile captivating.”

Cutting short his own laugh which was much too sardonic for a lady’s ears, he made a move as if to lead the way into another portion of the room. But Violet failed to notice this, and lingering in quiet contemplation of this suggestive little nick,— the only blemish in a room of ancient colonial magnificence,— she thoughtfully remarked:

“Then she was a small woman?” adding with seeming irrelevance —“like myself.”

Roger winced. Something in the suggestion hurt him, and in the nod he gave there was an air of coldness which under ordinary circumstances would have deterred her from pursuing this subject further. But the circumstances were not ordinary, and she allowed herself to say:

“Was she so very different from me,— in figure, I mean?”

“No. Why do you ask? Shall we not join your brother on the terrace?”

“Not till I have answered the question you put me a moment ago. You wished to know my requirements. One of the most important you have already fulfilled. You have given your servants a half-holiday and by so doing ensured to us full liberty of action. What else I need in the attempt I propose to make, you will find listed in this memorandum.” And taking a slip of paper from her bag, she offered it to him with a hand, the trembling of which he would have noted had he been freer in mind.

As he read, she watched him, her fingers nervously clutching her throat.

“Can you supply what I ask?” she faltered, as he failed to raise his eyes or make any move or even to utter the groan she saw surging up to his lips. “Will you?” she impetuously urged, as his fingers closed spasmodically on the paper, in evidence that he understood at last the trend of her daring purpose.

The answer came slowly, but it came. “I will. But what —”

Her hand rose in a pleading gesture.

“Do not ask me, but take Arthur and myself into the garden and show us the flowers. Afterwards, I should like a glimpse of the sea.”

He bowed and they joined Arthur who had already begun to stroll through the grounds.

Violet was seldom at a loss for talk even at the most critical moments. But she was strangely tongue-tied on this occasion, as was Roger himself. Save for a few observations casually thrown out by Arthur, the three passed in a disquieting silence through pergola after pergola, and around beds gorgeous with every variety of fall flowers, till they turned a sharp corner and came in full view of the sea.

“Ah!” fell in an admiring murmur from Violet’s lips as her eyes swept the horizon. Then as they settled on a mass of rock jutting out from the shore in a great curve, she leaned towards her host and softly whispered:

“The promontory?”

He nodded, and Violet ventured no farther, but stood for a little while gazing at the tumbled rocks. Then, with a quick look back at the house, she asked him to point out his father’s window.

He did so, and as she noted how openly it faced the sea, her expression relaxed and her manner lost some of its constraint. As they turned to re-enter the house, she noticed an old man picking flowers from a vine clambering over one end of the piazza.

“Who is that?” she asked.

“Our oldest servant, and my father’s own man,” was Roger’s reply. “He is picking my father’s favourite flowers, a few late honeysuckles.”

“How fortunate! Speak to him, Mr. Upjohn. Ask him how your father is this evening.”

“Accompany me and I will; and do not be afraid to enter into conversation with him. He is the mildest of creatures and devoted to his patient. He likes nothing better than to talk about him.”

Violet, with a meaning look at her brother, ran up the steps at Roger’s side. As she did so, the old man turned and Violet was astonished at the wistfulness with which he viewed her.

“What a dear old creature!” she murmured. “See how he stares this way. You would think he knew me.”

“He is glad to see a woman about the place. He has felt our isolation — Good evening, Abram. Let this young lady have a spray of your sweetest honeysuckle. And, Abram, before you go, how is Father to-night? Still sitting up?”

“Yes, sir. He is very regular in his ways. Nine is his hour; not a minute before and not a minute later. I don’t have to look at the clock when he says: ‘There, Abram, I’ve sat up long enough.’”

“When my father retires before his time or goes to bed without a final look at the sea, he will be a very sick man, Abram.”

“That he will, Mr. Roger; that he will. But he’s very feeble to-night, very feeble. I noticed that he gave the boy fewer kisses than usual. Perhaps he was put out because the child was brought in a half-hour earlier than the stated time. He don’t like changes; you know that, Mr. Roger; he don’t like changes. I hardly dared to tell him that the servants were all going out in a bunch to-night.”

“I’m sorry,” muttered Roger. “But he’ll forget it by to-morrow. I couldn’t bear to keep a single one from the concert. They’ll be back in good season and meantime we have you. Abram is worth half a dozen of them, Miss Strange. We shall miss nothing.”

“Thank you, Mr. Roger, thank you,” faltered the old man. “I try to do my duty.” And with another wistful glance at Violet, who looked very sweet and youthful in the half-light, he pottered away.

The silence which followed his departure was as painful to her as to Roger Upjohn. When she broke it it was with this decisive remark:

“That man must not speak of me to your father. He must not even mention that you have a guest to-night. Run after him and tell him so. It is necessary that your father’s mind should not be taken up with present happenings. Run.”

Roger made haste to obey her. When he came back she was on the point of joining her brother but stopped to utter a final injunction:

“I shall leave the library, or wherever we may be sitting, just as the clock strikes half-past eight. Arthur will do the same, as by that time he will feel like smoking on the terrace. Do not follow either him or myself, but take your stand here on the piazza where you can get a full view of the right-hand wing without attracting any attention to yourself. When you hear the big clock in the hall strike nine, look up quickly at your father’s window. What you see may determine — oh, Arthur! still admiring the prospect? I do not wonder. But I find it chilly. Let us go in.”

Roger Upjohn, sitting by himself in the library, was watching the hands of the mantel clock slowly approaching the hour of nine.

Never had silence seemed more oppressive nor his sense of loneliness greater. Yet the boom of the ocean was distinct to the ear, and human presence no farther away than the terrace where Arthur Strange could be seen smoking out his cigar in solitude. The silence and the loneliness were in Roger’s own soul; and, in face of the expected revelation which would make or unmake his future, the desolation they wrought was measureless.

To cut his suspense short, he rose at length and hurried out to the spot designated by Miss Strange as the best point from which to keep watch upon his father’s window. It was at the end of the piazza where the honeysuckle hung, and the odour of the blossoms, so pleasing to his father, well-nigh overpowered him not only by its sweetness but by the many memories it called up. Visions of that father as he looked at all stages of their relationship passed in a bewildering maze before him. He saw him as he appeared to his childish eyes in those early days of confidence when the loss of the mother cast them in mutual dependence upon each other. Then a sterner picture of the relentless parent who sees but one straight course to success in this world and the next. Then the teacher and the matured adviser; and then — oh, bitter change! the man whose hopes he had crossed — whose life he had undone, and all for her who now came stealing upon the scene with her slim, white, jewelled hand forever lifted up between them. And she! Had he ever seen her more clearly? Once more the dainty figure stepped from fairy-land, beauteous with every grace that can allure and finally destroy a man. And as he saw, he trembled and wished that these moments of awful waiting might pass and the test be over which would lay bare his father’s heart and justify his fears or dispel them forever.

But the crisis, if crisis it was, was one of his own making and not to be hastened or evaded. With one quick glance at his father’s window, he turned in his impatience towards the sea whose restless and continuous moaning had at length struck his ear. What was in its call to-night that he should thus sway towards it as though drawn by some dread magnetic force? He had been born to the dashing of its waves and knew its every mood and all the passion of its song from frolicsome ripple to melancholy dirge. But there was something odd and inexplicable in its effect upon his spirit as he faced it at this hour. Grim and implacable — a sound rather than a sight — it seemed to hold within its invisible distances the image of his future fate. What this image was and why he should seek for it in this impenetrable void, he did not know. He felt himself held and was struggling with this influence as with an unknown enemy when there rang out, from the hall within, the preparatory chimes for which his ear was waiting, and then the nine slow strokes which signalized the moment when he was to look for his father’s presence at the window.

Had he wished, he could not have forborne that look. Had his eyes been closing in death, or so he felt, the trembling lids would have burst apart at this call and the revelations it promised.

And what did he see? What did that window hold for him?

Nothing that he might not have seen there any night at this hour. His father’s figure drawn up behind the panes in wistful contemplation of the night. No visible change in his attitude, nothing forced or unusual in his manner. Even the hand, lifted to pull down the shade, moves with its familiar hesitation. In a moment more that shade will be down and — But no! the lifted hand falls back; the easy attitude becomes strained, fixed. He is staring now — not merely gazing out upon the wastes of sky and sea; and Roger, following the direction of his glance, stares also in breathless emotion at what those distances, but now so impenetrable, are giving to the eye.

A spectre floating in the air above the promontory! The spectre of a woman — of his wife, clad, as she had been clad that fatal night! Outlined in supernatural light, it faces them with lifted arms showing the ends of rope dangling from either wrist. A sight awful to any eye, but to the man of guilty heart —

Ah! it comes — the cry for which the agonized son had been listening! An old man’s shriek, hoarse with the remorse of sleepless nights and days of unimaginable regret and foreboding! It cuts the night. It cuts its way into his heart. He feels his senses failing him, yet he must glance once more at the window and see with his last conscious look — But what is this! a change has taken place in the picture and he beholds, not the distorted form of his father sinking back in shame and terror before this visible image of his secret sin, but that of another weak, old man falling to the floor behind his back! Abram! the attentive, seemingly harmless, guardian of the household! Abram! who had never spoken a word or given a look in any way suggestive of his having played any other part in the hideous drama of their lives than that of the humble and sympathetic servant!

The shock was too great, the relief too absolute for credence. He, the listener at the grotto? He, the avenger of the family’s honour? He, the insurer of little Roger’s continuance with the family at a cost the one who loved him best would rather have died himself than pay? Yes! there is no misdoubting this old servitor’s attitude of abject appeal, or the meaning of Homer Upjohn’s joyfully uplifted countenance and outspreading arms. The servant begs for mercy from man, and the master is giving thanks to Heaven. Why giving thanks? Has he been the prey of cankering doubts also? Has the father dreaded to discover that in the son which the son has dreaded to discover in the father?

It might easily be; and as Roger recognizes this truth and the full tragedy of their mutual lives, he drops to his knees amid the honeysuckles.

“Violet, you are a wonder. But how did you dare?”

This from Arthur as the two rode to the train in the early morning.

The answer came a bit waveringly.

“I do not know. I am astonished yet, at my own daring. Look at my hands. They have not ceased trembling since the moment you threw the light upon me on the rocks. The figure of old Mr. Upjohn in the window looked so august.”

Arthur, with a short glance at the little hands she held out, shrugged his shoulders imperceptibly. It struck him that the tremulousness she complained of was due more to some parting word from their young host, than from prolonged awe at her own daring. But he made no remark to this effect, only observed:

“Abram has confessed his guilt, I hear.”

“Yes, and will die of it. The master will bury the man, and not the man the master.”

“And Roger? Not the little fellow, but the father?”

“We will not talk of him,” said she, her eyes seeking the sea where the sun in its rising was battling with a troop of lowering clouds and slowly gaining the victory.