

# Dark Hollow

Anna Katherine Green

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#8 in our series by Anna Katherine Green

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# DARK HOLLOW

By ANNA KATHARINE GREEN

Author of "The House of the Whispering Pines," "Initials Only,"  
"That Affair Next Door," Etc.

With Four Illustrations By THOMAS FOGARTY

## BOOK I

### THE WOMAN IN PURPLE

I

#### WHERE IS BELA?

A high and narrow gate of carefully joined boards, standing ajar in a fence of the same construction! What is there in this to rouse a whole neighbourhood and collect before it a group of eager, anxious, hesitating people?

I will tell you.

This fence is no ordinary fence, and this gate no ordinary gate; nor is the fact of the latter standing a trifle open, one to be lightly regarded or taken an inconsiderate advantage of. For this is Judge Ostrander's place, and any one who knows Shelby or the gossip of its suburbs, knows that this house of his has not opened its doors to any outsider, man or woman, for over a dozen years; nor have his gates--in saying which, I include the great one in front--been seen in all that time to gape at any one's instance or to stand unclosed to public intrusion, no, not for a moment. The seclusion sought was absolute. The men and women who passed and repassed this corner many times a day were as ignorant as the townspeople in general of what lay behind the grey, monotonous exterior of the weather-beaten boards they so frequently brushed against. The house was there, of course,--they all knew the house, or did once--but there were rumours (no one ever knew how they originated) of another fence, a second barrier, standing a few feet inside the first and similar to it in all respects, even to the gates which corresponded exactly with these outer and visible ones and probably were just as fully provided with bolts and bars.

To be sure, these were reports rather than acknowledged facts, but the possibility of their truth roused endless wonder and gave to the eccentricities of this well-known man a mysterious significance which lost little or nothing in the slow passage of years.

And now! in the freshness of this summer morning, without warning

or any seeming reason for the change, the strict habit of years has been broken into and this gate of gates is not only standing unlocked before their eyes, but a woman--a stranger to the town as her very act shows--has been seen to enter there!--to enter, but not come out; which means that she must still be inside, and possibly in the very presence of the judge.

Where is Bela? Why does he allow his errands--But it was Bela, or so they have been told, who left this gate ajar ... he, the awe and terror of the town, the enormous, redoubtable, close-mouthed negro, trusted as man is seldom trusted, and faithful to his trust, yes, up to this very hour, as all must acknowledge, in spite of every temptation (and they had been many and alluring) to disclose the secret of this home of which he was not the least interesting factor. What has made him thus suddenly careless, he who has never been careless before? Money? A bribe from the woman who had entered there?

Impossible to believe, his virtue has always been so impeccable, his devotion to his strange and dominating master so sturdy and so seemingly unaffected by time and chance!

Yet, what else was there to believe? There stood the gate with the pebble holding it away from the post; and here stood half the neighbourhood, staring at that pebble and at the all but invisible crack it made where an opening had never been seen before, in a fascination which had for its motif, not so much the knowledge that these forbidden precincts had been invaded by a stranger, as that they were open to any intruding foot--that they, themselves, if they had courage enough, might go in, just as this woman had gone in, and see--why, what she is seeing now--the unknown, unguessed reason for all these mysteries;--the hidden treasure or the hidden sorrow which would explain why he, their first citizen, the respected, even revered judge of their highest court, should make use of such precautions and show such unvarying determination to bar out all comers from the place he called his home.

It had not always been so. Within the memory of many there it had been an abode of cheer and good fellowship. Not a few of the men and women now hesitating before its portals could boast of meals taken at the judge's ample board, and of evenings spent in animated conversation in the great room where he kept his books and did his writing.

But that was before his son left him in so unaccountable a manner; before--yes, all were agreed on this point--before that other bitter ordeal of his middle age, the trial and condemnation of the man who had waylaid and murdered his best friend.

Though the effect of these combined sorrows had not seemed to be immediate (one month had seen both); though a half-year had elapsed before all sociability was lost in extreme self-absorption, and a full one before he took down the picket-fence which had hitherto been considered a sufficient protection to his simple grounds, and put up these boards which had so completely isolated him from the rest of the world, it was evident enough to the friends who recalled his look and step as he walked the streets with Algernon Etheridge on one side and his brilliant, ever-successful son on the other, that the change now observable

in him was due to the violent sundering of these two ties. Affections so centred wreck the lives from which they are torn; and Time, which reconciles most men to their losses, had failed to reconcile him to his. Grief slowly settled into confirmed melancholy, and melancholy into the eccentricities of which I have spoken and upon which I must now enlarge a trifle further, in order that the curiosity and subsequent action of the small group of people in whom we are interested may be fully understood and, possibly, in some degree pardoned.

Judge Ostrander was, as I have certainly made you see, a recluse of the most uncompromising type; but he was such for only half his time. From ten in the morning till five in the afternoon, he came and went like any other citizen, fulfilling his judicial duties with the same scrupulous care as formerly and with more affability. Indeed, he showed at times, and often when it was least expected, a mellowness of temper quite foreign to him in his early days. The admiration awakened by his fine appearance on the bench was never marred now by those quick and rasping tones of an easily disturbed temper which had given edge to his invective when he stood as pleader in the very court where he now presided as judge. But away from the bench, once quit of the courthouse and the town, the man who attempted to accost him on his way to his carriage or sought to waylay him at his own gate, had need of all his courage to sustain the rebuff his presumption incurred.

One more detail and I will proceed with my story.

The son, a man of great ability who was making his way as a journalist in another city, had no explanation to give of his father's peculiarities. Though he never came to Shelby--the rupture between the two, if rupture it were, seeming to be complete--there were many who had visited him in his own place of business and put such questions concerning the judge and his eccentric manner of living as must have provoked response had the young man had any response to give. But he appeared to have none. Either he was as ignorant as themselves of the causes which had led to his father's habit of extreme isolation, or he showed powers of dissimulation hardly in accordance with the other traits of his admirable character.

All of which closed inquiry in this direction, but left the maw of curiosity unsatisfied.

And unsatisfied it had remained up to this hour, when through accident--or was it treachery--the barrier to knowledge was down and the question of years seemed at last upon the point of being answered.

II

WAS HE LIVING?--WAS HE DEAD?

Meantime, a fussy, talkative man was endeavouring to impress the rapidly collecting crowd with the advisability of their entering

all together and approaching the judge in a body.

"We can say that we felt it to be our dooty to follow this woman in," he argued. "We don't know who she is, or what her errand is. She may mean harm; I've heard of such things, and are we goin' to see the judge in danger and do nothin'?"

"Oh, the woman's all right," spoke up another voice. "She has a child with her. Didn't you say she had a child with her, Miss Weeks?"

"Yes, and--"

"Tell us the whole story, Miss Weeks. Some of us haven't heard it. Then if it seems our duty as his neighbours and well-wishers to go in, we'll just go in."

The little woman towards whom this appeal--or shall I say command--was directed, flushed a fine colour under so many eyes, but immediately began her ingenuous tale. She had already related it a half dozen times into as many sympathising ears, but she was not one to shirk publicity, for all her retiring manners and meekness of disposition.

It was to this effect:

She was sitting in her front window sewing. (Everybody knew that this window faced the end of the lane in which they were then standing.) The blinds were drawn but not quite, being held in just the desired position by a string. Naturally, she could see out without being very plainly seen herself; and quite naturally, too, since she had watched the same proceeding for years, she had her eyes on this gate when Bela, prompt to the minute as he always was, issued forth on his morning walk to town for the day's supplies.

Always exact, always in a hurry--knowing as he did that the judge would not leave for court till his return--he had never, in all the eight years she had been sitting in that window making button-holes, shown any hesitation in his methodical relocking of the gate and subsequent quick departure.

But this morning he had neither borne himself with his usual spirit nor moved with his usual promptitude. Instead of stepping at once into the lane, he had lingered in the gate-way peering to right and left and pushing the gravel aside with his foot in a way so unlike himself that the moment he was out of sight, she could not help running down the lane to see if her suspicions were correct.

And they were. Not only had he left the gate unlocked, but he had done so purposely. The movement he had made with his foot had been done for the purpose of pushing into place a small pebble, which, as all could see, lay where it would best prevent the gate from closing.

What could such treachery mean, and what was her neighbourly duty under circumstances so unparalleled? Should she go away, or stop and take one peep just to see that there really was another and

similar fence inside of this one? She had about decided that it was only proper for her to enter and make sure that all was right with the judge, when she experienced that peculiar sense of being watched with which all of us are familiar, and turning quickly round, saw a woman looking at her from the road,--a woman all in purple even to the veil which hid her features. A little child was with her, and the two must have stepped into the road from behind some of the bushes, as neither of them were anywhere in sight when she herself came running down from the corner.

It was enough to startle any one, especially as the woman did not speak but just stood silent and watchful till Miss Weeks in her embarrassment began to edge away towards home in the hope that the other would follow her example and so leave the place free for her to return and take the little peep she had promised herself.

But before she had gone far, she realised that the other was not following her, but was still standing in the same spot, watching her through a veil the like of which is not to be found in Shelby, and which in itself was enough to rouse a decent woman's suspicions.

She was so amazed at this that she stepped back and attempted to address the stranger. But before she had got much further than a timid and hesitating Madam, the woman, roused into action possibly by her interference, made a quick gesture suggestive of impatience if not rebuke, and moving resolutely towards the gate Miss Weeks had so indiscreetly left unguarded, pushed it open and disappeared within, dragging the little child after her.

The audacity of this act, perpetrated without apology before Miss Weeks' very eyes, was too much for that lady's equanimity. She stopped stock-still, and, as she did so, beheld the gate swing heavily to and stop an inch from the post, hindered as we know by the intervening pebble. She had scarcely got over the shock of this when plainly from the space beyond she heard a second creaking noise, then the swinging to of another gate, followed, after a breathless moment of intense listening, by a series of more distant sounds, which could only be explained by the supposition that the house door had been reached, opened and passed.

"And you didn't follow?"

"I didn't dare."

"And she's in there still?"

"I haven't seen her come out."

"Then what's the matter with you?" called out a burly, high-strung woman, stepping hastily from the group and laying her hand upon the gate still standing temptingly ajar. "It's no time for nonsense," she announced, as she pushed it open and stepped promptly in, followed by the motley group of men and women who, if they lacked courage to lead, certainly showed willingness enough to follow.

One glance and they felt their courage rewarded.

Rumour, which so often deceives, proved itself correct in this case. A second gate confronted them exactly like the first even to the point of being held open by a pebble placed against the post. And a second fence also! built upon the same pattern as the one they had just passed through; the two forming a double barrier as mysterious to contemplate in fact as it had ever been in fancy. In gazing at these fences and the canyon-like walk stretching between them, the band of curious invaders forgot their prime errand. Many were for entering this path whose terminus they could not see for the sharp turns it took in rounding either corner. Among them was a couple of girls who had but one thought, as was evinced by their hurried whispers. "If it looks like this in the daytime, what must it be at night!" To which came the quick retort: "I've heard that the judge walks here. Imagine it under the moon!"

But whatever the mysteries of the place, a greater one awaited them beyond, and presently realising this, they burst with one accord through the second gate into the mass of greenery, which, either from neglect or intention, masked this side of the Ostrander homestead.

Never before had they beheld so lawless a growth or a house so completely lost amid vines and shrubbery. So unchecked had been the spread of verdure from base to chimney, that the impression made by the indistinguishable mass was one of studied secrecy and concealment. Not a window remained in view, and had it not been for some chance glimmers here and there where some small, unguarded portion of the enshrouded panes caught and reflected the sunbeams, they could not have told where they were located in these once well-known walls.

Two solemn fir trees, which were all that remained of an old-time and famous group, kept guard over the untended lawn, adding their suggestion of age and brooding melancholy to the air of desolation infecting the whole place. One might be approaching a tomb for all token that appeared of human presence. Even sound was lacking. It was like a painted scene--a dream of human extinction.

Instinctively the women faltered and the men drew back; then the very silence caused a sudden reaction, and with one simultaneous rush, they made for the only entrance they saw and burst without further ceremony into the house.

A common hall and common furnishings confronted them. They had entered at the side and were evidently close upon the kitchen. More they could not gather; for blocked as the doorway was by their crowding figures, the little light which sifted in over their heads was not enough to show up details.

But it was even darker in the room towards which their determined leader now piloted them. Here there was no light at all; or if some stray glimmer forced its way through the network of leaves swathing the outer walls, it was of too faint a character to reach the corners or even to make the furniture about them distinguishable.

Halting with one accord in what seemed to be the middle of the uncarpeted floor, they waited for some indication of a clear

passageway to the great room where the judge would undoubtedly be found in conversation with his strange guest, unless, forewarned by their noisy entrance, he should have risen already to meet them. In that case they might expect at any minute to see his tall form emerging in anger upon them through some door at present unseen.

This possibility, new to some but recognised from the first by others, fluttered the breasts of such as were not quite impervious to a sense of their own presumption, and as they stood in a close group, swaying from side to side in a vain endeavour to see their way through the gloom before them, the whimper of a child and the muttered ejaculations of the men testified that the general feeling was one of discontent which might very easily end in an outburst of vociferous expression.

But the demon of curiosity holds fast and as soon as their eyes had become sufficiently used to the darkness to notice the faint line of light marking the sill of a door directly in front of them, they all plunged forward in spite of the fear I have mentioned.

The woman of the harsh voice and self-satisfied demeanour, who had started them upon this adventure, was still ahead; but even she quailed when, upon laying her hand upon the panel of the door she was the first to reach, she felt it to be cold and knew it to be made not of wood but of iron. How great must be the treasure or terrible the secret to make necessary such extraordinary precautions! Was it for her to push open this door, and so come upon discoveries which--

But here her doubts were cut short by finding herself face to face with a heavy curtain instead of a yielding door. The pressure of the crowd behind had precipitated her past the latter into a small vestibule which acted as an ante-chamber to the very room they were in search of.

The shock restored her self-possession. Bracing herself, she held her place for a moment, while she looked back, with a finger laid on her lip. The light was much better here and they could all see both the move she made and the expression which accompanied it.

"Look at this!" she whispered, pushing the curtain inward with a quick movement.

Her hand had encountered no resistance. There was nothing between them and the room beyond but a bit of drapery.

"Now hark, all of you," fell almost soundlessly from her lips, as she laid her own ear against the curtain.

And they hearkened.

Not a murmur came from within, not so much as the faintest rustle of clothing or the flutter of a withheld breath. All was perfectly still--too still. As the full force of this fact impressed itself upon them, a blankness settled over their features. The significance of this undisturbed quiet was making itself felt. If the two were there, or if he were there alone, they would

certainly hear some movement, voluntary or involuntary--and they could hear nothing. Was the woman gone? Had she found her way out front while they approached from the rear? And the judge! Was he gone also?--this man of inalterable habits--gone before Bela's return--a thing he had not been known to do in the last twelve years? No, no, this could not be. Yet even this supposition was not so incredible as that he should still be here and SILENT. Men like him do not hold their peace under a provocation so great as the intrusion of a mob of strangers into a spot where he never anticipated seeing anybody, nor had seen anybody but his man Bela for years. Soon they would hear his voice. It was not in nature for him to be as quiet as this in face of such audacity.

Yet who could count upon the actions of an Ostrander, or reckon with the imperious whims of a man mysterious beyond all precedent?--He may be there but silent, or--

A single glance would settle all.

The woman drew the curtain.

Sunshine! A stream of it, dazzling them almost to blindness and sending them, one and all, pellmell back upon each other! However dismal the approach, here all was in brilliant light with every evidence before them of busy life.

The room was not only filled, but crammed, with furniture. This was the first thing they noticed; then, as their blinking eyes became accustomed to the glare and to the unexpected confusion of tables and chairs and screens and standing receptacles for books and pamphlets and boxes labelled and padlocked, they beheld something else; something, which once seen, held the eye from further wandering and made the apprehensions from which they had suffered sink into insignificance before a real and only too present terror.

The judge was there! but in what a condition.

From the end of the forty foot room, his seated figure confronted them, silent, staring and unmoving. With clenched fingers gripping the arms of his great chair, and head held forward, he looked like one frozen at the moment of doom, such the expression of features usually so noble, and now almost unrecognisable were it not for the snow of his locks and his unmistakable brow.

Frozen! Not an eyelash quivered, nor was there any perceptible movement in his sturdy chest. His eyes were on their eyes, but he saw no one; and down upon his head and over his whole form the sunshine poured from a large window let into the ceiling directly above him, lighting up the strained and unnatural aspect of his remarkable countenance and bringing into sharp prominence the commonplace objects cluttering the table at his elbow; such as his hat and gloves, and the bundle of papers he had doubtless made ready for court.

Was he living? Was he dead?--stricken by the sight of so many faces in a doorway considered sacred from all intrusion? No! the emotion capable of thus transforming the features of so strong a man must have a deeper source than that. The woman was to blame

for this--the audacious, the unknown, the mysteriously clad woman. Let her be found. Let her be made to explain herself and the condition into which she had thrown this good man.

Indignation burst into words, and pity was beginning to voice itself in inarticulate murmurs which swelled and ebbed, now louder, now more faintly as the crowd surged forward or drew back, appalled by that moveless, breathless, awe-compelling figure. Indignation and pity were at their height when the strain which held them all in one common leash was loosed by the movement of a little child.

Attracted possibly by what it did not understand, or simply made fearless because of its non-comprehension of the mystery before him, a curly-haired boy suddenly escaped its mother's clutch, and, toddling up by a pathway of his own to the awesome form in the great chair, laid his little hand on the judge's rigid arm and, looking up into his face, babbled out:

"Why don't you get up, man? I like oo better up."

A breathless moment; then the horrified murmur rose here, there and everywhere: "He's dead! He's dead!" and the mother, with a rush, caught the child back, and confusion began its reign, when quietly and convincingly a bluff and masculine voice spoke from the doorway behind them and they heard:

"You needn't be frightened. In an hour or a half-hour he will be the same as ever. My aunt has such attacks. They call it catalepsy."

III

BELA THE REDOUBTABLE

CATALEPSY!

A dread word to the ignorant.

Imperceptibly the crowd dwindled; the most discreet among them quite content to leave the house; others, with their curiosity inflamed anew, to poke about and peer into corners and curtained recesses while the opportunity remained theirs and the man of whom they stood in fear sat lapsed in helpless unconsciousness. A few, and these the most thoughtful, devoted all their energies to a serious quest for the woman and child whom they continued to believe to be in hiding somewhere inside the walls she had so audaciously entered.

Among these was Miss Weeks whose importance none felt more than herself, and it was at her insistence and under her advice (for she only, of all who remained, had ever had a previous acquaintance with the house) that the small party decided to start their search by a hasty inspection of the front hall. As this could not be reached from the room where its owner's motionless

figure sat at its grim watch, they were sidling hastily out, with eyes still turned back in awful fascination upon those other eyes which seemed to follow all their movements and yet gave no token of life, when a shout and scramble in the passages beyond cut short their intent and held them panting and eager, each to his place.

"They've seen her! They've found her!" ran in quick, whispered suggestion from lip to lip, and some were for rushing to see.

But Miss Weeks' trim and precise figure blocked the doorway, and she did not move.

"Hark!" she murmured in quick admonishment; "what is that other sound? Something is happening--something dreadful. What is it? It does not seem to be near here yet, but it is coming--coming."

Frightened in spite of themselves, both by her manner and tone, they drew their gaze from the rigid figure in the chair, and, with bated breaths and rapidly paling cheeks, listened to the distant murmur on the far-off road, plainly to be heard pulsing through the nearer sounds of rushing feet and chattering voices in the rooms about.

What was it? They could not guess, and it was with unbounded relief they pressed forward to greet the shadowy form of a young girl hurrying towards them from the rear, with news in her face. She spoke quickly and before Miss Weeks could frame her question.

"The woman is gone. Harry Doane saw her sliding out behind us just after we came in. She was hiding in some of the corners here, and slipped out by the kitchen-way when we were not looking. He has gone to see--"

But interesting as this was, the wonder of the now rapidly increasing hubbub was more so. A mob was at the gates! Men, women and children shouting, panting and making loud calls.

Breathlessly Miss Weeks cut the girl's story short; breathlessly she rushed to the nearest window, and, helped by willing hands, succeeded in forcing it up and tearing a hole in the vines, through which they one and all looked out in eager excitement.

A motley throng of people were crowding in through the double gateway. Some one was in their grasp. Was it the woman? No; it was Bela! Bela, the giant! Bela, the terror of the town, but no longer a terror now but a struggling, half-fainting figure, fighting to free itself and get in advance, despite some awful hurt which blanched his coal-black features into an indescribable hue and made his great limbs falter and his gasping mouth writhe in anguish while still keeping his own and making his way, by sheer force of will, up the path and the two steps of entrance--his body alternately sinking back or plunging forward as those in the rear or those in front got the upper hand.

It was an awful and a terrifying sight to little Miss Weeks and, screaming loudly, she left her window and ran, scattering her small party before her like sheep, not into the near refuge of the front hall and its quiet parlours, but into the very spot towards

which this mob seemed headed--the great library pulsing with its own terror, in the shape of the yet speechless and unconscious man to whom the loudest noise and the most utter silence were yet as one, and the worst struggle of human passion a blank lost in unmeaning chaos.

Why this instinctive move? She could not tell. Impulse prevailed, and without a thought she flew into Judge Ostrander's presence, and, gazing wildly about, wormed her way towards a heavily carved screen guarding a distant corner, and cowered down behind it.

What awaited her?

What awaited the judge?

As the little woman shook with terror in her secret hiding-place she felt that she had played him false; that she had no right to save herself by the violation of a privacy she should have held in awe. She was paying for her temerity now, paying for it with every terrible moment that her suspense endured. The gasping, struggling men, the frantic negro, were in the next room now--she could catch the sound of the latter's panting breath rising above the clamour of strange entreaties and excited cries with which the air was full; then a quick, hoarse shout of "Judge! Judge!" rose in the doorway, and she became conscious of the presence of a headlong, rushing force struck midway into silence as the frozen figure of his master flashed upon the negro's eyes;--then,--a growl of concentrated emotion, uttered almost in her ear, and the screen which had been her refuge was violently thrust away from before her, and in its place she beheld a terrible being standing over her, in whose eyes, dilating under this fresh surprise, she beheld her doom, even while recognising that if she must suffer it would be simply as an obstacle to some goal at her back which he must reach--now--before he fell in his blood and died.

What was this goal? As she felt herself lifted, nay, almost hurled aside, she turned to see and found it to be a door before which the devoted Bela had now thrown himself, guarding it with every inch of his powerful but rapidly sinking body, and chattering defiance with his bloodless, quivering lips--a figure terrible in anger, sublime in purpose, and piteous in its failing energies.

"Back! all of you!" he cried, and stopped, clutching at the door-casing on either side to hold himself erect. "You cannot come in here. This is the judge's--"

Not even his iron resolve or once unequalled physique could stand the sapping of the terrible gash which disfigured his forehead. He had been run over by an automobile in a moment of blind abstraction, and his hurt was mortal. But though his tongue refused to finish, his eye still possessed its power to awe and restrain. Though the crowd had followed him almost into the centre of the room, they felt themselves held back by the spirit of this man, who as long as he lived and breathed would hold himself a determined barrier between them and what he had been set to guard.

As long as he lived and breathed. Alas! that would be but a little while now. Already his head, held erect by the passion of his purpose, was sinking on his breast; already his glazing eye was

losing its power of concentration, when with a final rally of his decaying strength, he started erect again and cried out in terrible appeal:

"I have disobeyed the judge, and, as you see, it has killed him. Do not make me guilty of giving away his secret. Swear that you will leave this door unpassed; swear that no one but his son shall ever turn this lock; or I will haunt you, I, Bela, man by man, till you sink in terror to your graves. Swear! sw--"

The last adjuration ended in a moan. His head fell forward again and in that intense moment of complete silence they could hear the splash of his life-blood as it dropped from his forehead on to the polished boards beneath; then he threw up his arms and fell in a heap to the floor.

They had not been driven to answer. Wherever that great soul had gone, his ears were no longer open to mortal promise, nor would any oath from the lip of man avail to smooth his way into the shadowy unknown.

"Dead!" broke from little Miss Weeks as she flung herself down in reckless abandonment at his side. She had never known an agitation beyond some fluttering woman's hope she had stifled as soon as born, and now she knelt in blood. "Dead!" she again repeated. And there was no one this time to cry: "You need not be frightened; in a few minutes he will be himself again." The master might reawaken to life, but never more the man.

A solemn hush, then a mighty sigh of accumulated emotion swept from lip to lip, and the crowd of later invaders, already abashed if not terrified by the unexpected spectacle of suspended animation which confronted them from the judge's chair, shrank tumultuously back as little Miss Weeks advanced upon them, holding out her meagre arms in late defence of the secret to save which she had just seen a man die.

"Let us do as he wished," she prayed. "I feel myself much to blame. What right had we to come in here?"

"The fellow was hurt. We were just bringing him home," spoke up a voice, rough with the surprise of unaccustomed feeling. "If he had let us carry him, he might have been alive this minute; but he would run and struggle to keep us back. He says he killed his master. If so, his death is a retribution. Don't you say so, fellows? The judge was a good man---"

"Hush! hush! the judge is all right," admonished one of the party; "he'll be waking up soon"; and then, as every eye flew in fresh wonder towards the chair and its impassive occupant, the low whisper was heard,--no one ever could tell from whose lips it fell: "If we are ever to know this wonderful secret, now is the time, before he wakes and turns us out of the house."

No one in authority was present; no one representing the law, not even a doctor; only haphazard persons from the street and a few neighbours who had not been on social terms with the judge for years and never expected to be so again. His secret!--always a source of wonder to every inhabitant of Shelby, but lifted now

into a matter of vital importance by the events of the day and the tragic death of the negro! Were they to miss its solution, when only a door lay between it and them--a door which they might not even have to unlock? If the judge should rouse,--if from a source of superstitious terror he became an active one, how pat their excuse might be. They were but seeking a proper place--a couch--a bed--on which to lay the dead man. They had been witness to his hurt; they had been witness to his death, and were they to leave him lying in his blood, to shock the eyes of his master when he came out of his long swoon? No tongue spoke these words, but the cunning visible in many an eye and the slight start made by more than one eager foot in the direction of the forbidden door gave Miss Weeks sufficient warning of what she might expect in another moment. Making the most of her diminutive figure,--such a startling contrast to the one which had just dominated there!--she was about to utter an impassioned appeal to their honour, when the current of her and their thoughts, as well as the direction of all looks, was changed by a sudden sense common to all, of some strange new influence at work in the room, and turning, they beheld the judge upon his feet, his mind awakened, but his eyes still fixed--an awesome figure; some thought more awesome than before; for the terror which still held him removed from all about, was no longer passive but active and had to do with what no man there could understand or alleviate. Death was present with them--he saw it not. Strangers were making havoc with his solitude--he was as oblivious of their presence as he had been unconscious of it before. His faculties and all his attention were absorbed by the thought which had filled his brain when the cogs of that subtle mechanism had slipped and his faculties paused inert.

This was shown by his first question:

"WHERE IS THE WOMAN?"

It was a cry of fear; not of mastery.

IV

"AND WHERE WAS I WHEN ALL THIS HAPPENED?"

The intensity of the question, the compelling, self-forgetful passion of the man, had a startling effect upon the crowd of people huddled before him. With one accord, and without stopping to pick their way, they made for the open doorway, knocking the smaller pieces of furniture about and creating havoc generally. Some fled the house; others stopped to peer in again from behind the folds of the curtain which had been only partially torn from its fastenings. Miss Weeks was the only one to stand her ground.

When the room was quite cleared and the noise abated (it was a frightful experience to see how little the judge had been affected by all this hubbub of combined movement and sound), she stepped within the line of his vision and lifted her feeble and ineffectual hand in an effort to attract his attention to herself.

But he did not notice her, any more than he had noticed the others. Still looking in the one direction, he cried aloud in troubled tones:

"She stood there! the woman stood there and I saw her! Where is she now?"

"She is no longer in the house," came in gentle reply from the only one in or out of the room courageous enough to speak. "She went out when she saw us coming. We knew that she had no right to be here. That is why we intruded ourselves, sir. We did not like the looks of her, and so followed her in to prevent mischief."

"Ah!"

The expletive fell unconsciously. He seemed to be trying to adjust himself to some mental experience he could neither share with others nor explain to himself.

"She was here, then?--a woman with a little child? It wasn't an illusion, a--." Memory was coming back and with it a realisation of his position. Stopping short, he gazed down from his great height upon the trembling little body of whose identity he had but a vague idea, and thundered out in great indignation:

"How dared you! How dared she!" Then as his mind regained its full poise, "And how, even if you had the temerity to venture an entrance here, did you manage to pass my gates? They are never open. Bela sees to that."

Bela!

He may have observed the pallor which blanched her small, tense features as this name fell so naturally from his lips, or some instinct of his own may have led him to suspect tragedy where all was so abnormally still, for, as she watched, she saw his eyes, fixed up to now upon her face, leave it and pass furtively and with many hesitations from object to object, towards that spot behind him, where lay the source of her great terror, if not of his. So lingeringly and with such dread was this done, that she could barely hold back her weak woman's scream in the intensity of her suspense. She knew just where his glances fell without following them with her own. She saw them pass the door where so many faces yet peered in (he saw them not), and creep along the wall beyond, inch by inch, breathlessly and with dread, till finally, with fatal precision, they reached the point where the screen had stood, and not finding it, flew in open terror to the door it was set there to conceal--when that something else, huddled in oozing blood, on the floor beneath, drew them unto itself with the irresistibility of grim reality, and he forgot all else in the horror of a sight for which his fears, however great, had failed to prepare him.

Dead! BELA! Dead! and lying in his blood! The rest may have been no dream, but this was surely one, or his eyes, used to inner visions, were playing him false.

Grasping the table at his side to steady his failing limbs, he

pulled himself along by its curving edge till he came almost abreast of the helpless figure which for so many years had been the embodiment of faithful and unwearied service.

Then and then only, did the truth of his great misfortune burst upon his bewildered soul; and with a cry which tore the ears of all hearers and was never forgotten by any one there, he flung himself down beside the dead negro, and, turning him hastily over, gazed in his face.

Was that a sob? Yes; thus much the heart gave; but next moment the piteous fact of loss was swallowed up in the recognition of its manner, and, bounding to his feet with the cry, "Killed! Killed at his post!" he confronted the one witness of his anguish of whose presence he was aware, and fiercely demanded: "Where are the wretches who have done this? No single arm could have knocked down Bela. He has been set upon--beaten with clubs, and--" Here his thought was caught up by another, and that one so fearsome and unsettling that bewilderment again followed rage, and with the look of a haunted spirit, he demanded in a voice made low by awe and dread of its own sound, "AND WHERE WAS I, WHEN ALL THIS HAPPENED?"

"You? You were seated there," murmured the little woman, pointing at the great chair. "You were not--quite--quite yourself," she softly explained, wondering at her own composure. Then quickly, as she saw his thoughts revert to the dead friend at his feet, "Bela was not hurt here. He was down town when it happened; but he managed to struggle home and gain this place, which he tried to hold against the men who followed him. He thought you were dead, you sat there so rigid and so white, and, before he quite gave up, he asked us all to promise not to let any one enter this room till your son Oliver came."

Understanding partly, but not yet quite clear in his mind, the judge sighed, and stooping again, straightened the faithful negro's limbs. Then, with a sidelong look in her direction, he felt in one of the pockets of the dead negro's coat, and drawing out a small key, held it in one hand while he fumbled in his own for another, which found, he became on the instant his own man again.

Miss Weeks, seeing the difference in him, and seeing too, that the doorway was now clear of the wondering, awestruck group which had previously blocked it, bowed her slight body and proceeded to withdraw; but the judge, staying her by a gesture, she waited patiently near one of the book-racks against which she had stumbled, to hear what he had to say.

"I must have had an attack of some kind," he calmly remarked. "Will you be good enough to explain exactly what occurred here that I may more fully comprehend my own misfortune and the death of this faithful friend?"

Then she saw that his faculties were now fully restored, and came a step forward. But before she could begin her story, he added this searching question:

"Was it he who let you in--you and others--I think you said

others? Was it he who unlocked my gates?"

Miss Weeks sighed and betrayed fluster. It was not easy to relate her story; besides it was woefully incomplete. She knew nothing of what had happened down town, she could only tell what had passed before her eyes. But there was one thing she could make clear, to him, and that was how the seemingly impassable gates had been made ready for the woman's entrance and afterwards taken such advantage of by herself and others. A pebble had done it all,--a pebble placed in the gateway by Bela's hands.

As she described this, and insisted upon the fact in face of the judge's almost frenzied disclaimer, she thought she saw the hair move on his forehead. Bela a traitor, and in the interests of the woman who had fronted him from the other end of the room at the moment consciousness had left him! Evidently this intrusive little body did not know Bela or his story, or--

Why should interruption come then? Why was he stopped, when in the passion of the moment, he might have let fall some word of enlightenment which would have eased the agitated curiosity of the whole town! Miss Weeks often asked herself this question, and bewailed the sudden access of sounds in the rooms without, which proclaimed the entrance of the police and put a new strain upon the judge's faculty of self-control and attention to the one matter in hand.

The commonplaces of an official inquiry were about to supersede the play of a startled spirit struggling with a problem of whose complexities he had received but a glimpse.

V

"SHE WORE PURPLE"

The library again! but how changed! Evening light now instead of blazing sunshine; and evening light so shaded that the corners seemed far and the many articles of furniture, cumbering the spaces between, larger for the shadows in which they stood hidden. Perhaps the man who sat there in company with the judge regretted this. Perhaps, he would have preferred to see more perfectly that portion of the room where Bela had taken his stand and finally fallen. It would have been interesting to note whether the screen had been replaced before the mysterious door which this most devoted of servants had protected to his last gasp. Curiosity is admissible, even in a man, when the cause is really great.

But from the place where he sat there was no getting any possible view of that part of the wall or of anything connected with it; and so, with every appearance of satisfaction at being allowed in the room at all, Sergeant Doolittle from Headquarters, drank the judge's wine and listened for the judge's commands.

These were slow in coming, and they were unexpected when they came.

"Sergeant, I have lost a faithful servant under circumstances which have called an unfortunate attention to my house. I should like to have this place guarded--carefully guarded, you understand--from any and all intrusion till I can look about me and secure protection of my own. May I rely upon the police to do this, beginning to-night at an early hour? There are loiterers already at the corner and in front of the two gates. I am not accustomed to these attentions, and ask to have my fence cleared."

"Two men are already detailed for the job, your honour. I heard the order given just as I left Headquarters."

The judge showed small satisfaction. Indeed, in his silence there was the hint of something like displeasure. This surprised Sergeant Doolittle and led him to attempt to read its cause in his host's countenance. But the shade of the lamp intervened too completely, and he had to be content to wait till the judge chose to speak, which he presently did, though not in the exact tones the Sergeant expected.

"Two men! Couldn't I have three? One for each gate and one to patrol the fence separating these grounds from the adjoining lot?"

The sergeant hesitated; he felt an emotion of wonder--a sense of something more nearly approaching the uncanny than was usual to his matter-of-fact mind. He had heard, often enough, what store the judge set on his privacy and of the extraordinary measures he had taken to insure it, but that a man, even if he aped the hermit, should consider three men necessary to hold the public away from a two hundred and fifty foot lot argued apprehensions of a character verging on the ridiculous. But he refrained from expressing his surprise and replied, after a minute of thought:

"If two men are not enough to ensure you a quiet sleep, you shall have three or four or even more, Judge Ostrander. Do you want one of them to stay inside? That might do the business better than a dozen out."

"No. While Bela lies above ground, we want no third here. When he is buried, I may call upon you for a special to watch my room door. But it's of outside protection we're talking now. Only, who is to protect me against your men?"

"What do you mean by that, your honour?"

"They are human, are they not? They have instincts of curiosity like the rest of us. How can I be made sure that they won't yield to the temptation of their position and climb the fences they are detailed to guard?"

"And would this be so fatal to your peace, judge?" A smile tempered the suggestion.

"It would be a breach of trust which would greatly disturb me. I want nobody on my grounds, nobody at all. Has not my long life of solitude within these walls sufficiently proved this? I want to feel that these men of yours would no more climb my fence than they would burst into my house without a warrant."

Judge, I will be one of the men. You can trust me."

"Thank you, sergeant; I appreciate the favour. I shall rest now as quietly as any man can who has met with a great loss. The coroner's inquiry has decided that the injuries which Bela received in the street were of a fatal character and would have killed him within an hour, even if he had not exhausted his strength in the effort he made to return to his home and die in my presence. But I shall always suffer from regret that I was not in a condition to receive his last sigh. He was a man in a thousand. One seldom sees his like among white or black."

"He was a very powerfully built man. It took a sixty horse-power racing machine, going at a high rate of speed, to kill him."

A spasm of grief or unavailing regret crossed the judge's face as his head sank back again against the high back of his chair.

"Enough," said he; "tread softly when you go by the sofa on which he lies. Will you fill your glass again, sergeant?"

The sergeant declined.

"Not if my watch is to be effective to-night," he smiled, and rose to depart.

The judge, grown suddenly thoughtful, rapped with his finger-tips on the table-edge. He had not yet risen to show his visitor out.

"I should like to ask a question," he finally observed, motioning the other to re-seat himself. "You were not at the inquiry this afternoon, and may not know that just as Bela and the crowd about him turned this corner, they ran into a woman leading a small child, who stopped the whole throng in order to address him. No one heard what she said; and no one could give any information as to who she was or in what direction she vanished. But I saw that woman myself, earlier. She was in this house. She was in this room. She came as far as that open space just inside the doorway. I can describe her, and will, if you will consent to look for her. It is to be a money transaction, sergeant, and if she is found and no stir made and no talk started among the Force, I will pay all that you think it right to demand."

"Let me hear her description, your honour." The judge, who had withdrawn into the shadow, considered for a moment, then said:

"I cannot describe her features, for she was heavily veiled; neither can I describe her figure except to say that she is tall and slender. But her dress I remember to the last detail, though I am not usually so observant. She wore purple; not an old woman's purple, but a soft shade which did not take from her youth. There was something floating round her shoulders of the same colour, and on her arms were long gloves such as you see our young ladies wear. The child did not seem to belong to her, though she held her tightly by the hand. I mean by that, that its clothes were of a coarser material than hers and perhaps were a little soiled. If the child wore a hat, I do not remember it. In age it appeared to be about six--or that was the impression I received before--"

The sergeant, who had been watching the speaker very closely, leaned forward with a hasty, inquiring glance expressive of something like consternation. Was the judge falling again into unconsciousness? Was he destined to witness in this solitary meeting a return of the phenomenon which had so startled the intruding populace that morning?

No, or if he had been witness to something of the kind, it was for a moment only; for the eyes which had gone blank had turned his way again, and only a disconnected expression which fell from the judge's lips, showed that his mind had been wandering.

"It's not the same but another one; that's all."

Inconsequent words, but the sergeant meant to remember them, for with their utterance, a change passed over the judge; and his manner, which had been constrained and hurried during his attempted description, became at once more natural, and therefore more courteous.

"Do you think you can find her with such insufficient data? A woman dressed in purple, leading a little child without any hat?"

"Judge, I not only feel sure that I can find her, but I think she is found already. Do you remember the old tavern on the Rushville road? I believe they call it an inn now, or some such fancy name."

The judge sat quiet, but the sergeant who dared not peer too closely, noticed a sudden constriction in the fingers of the hand with which his host fingered a paper-cutter lying on the table between them.

"The one where--"

"I respect your hesitation, judge. Yes, the one run by the man you sentenced--"

A gesture had stopped him. He waited respectfully for the judge's next words.

They came quickly and with stern and solemn emphasis.

"For a hideous and wholly unprovoked crime. Why do you mention it and--and his tavern?"

"Because of something I have lately heard in its connection. You know that the old house has been all made over since that time and run as a place of resort for automobilists in search of light refreshments. The proprietor's name is Yardley. We have nothing against him; the place is highly respectable. But it harbours a boarder, a permanent one, I believe, who has occasioned no little comment. No one has ever seen her face; unless it is the landlord's wife. She has all her meals served in her room, and when she goes out she wears the purple dress and purple veil you've been talking about. Perhaps she's your visitor of to-day. Hadn't I better find out?"

"Has she a child? Is she a mother?"

"I haven't heard of any child, but Mrs. Yardley has seven."

The judge's hand withdrew from the table and for an instant the room was so quiet that you could hear some far-off clock ticking out the minutes. Then Judge Ostrander rose and in a peremptory tone said:

"To-morrow. After you hear from me again. Make no move to-night. Let me feel that all your energies are devoted to securing my privacy."

The sergeant, who had sprung to his feet at the same instant as the judge, cast a last look about him, curiosity burning in his heart and a sort of desperate desire to get all he could out of his present opportunity. For he felt absolutely sure that he would never be allowed to enter this room again.

But the arrangement of light was such as to hold in shadow all but the central portion of the room; and this central portion held nothing out of the common--nothing to explain the mysteries of the dwelling or the apprehensions of its suspicious owner. With a sigh, the sergeant dropped his eyes from the walls he could barely distinguish, and following Judge Ostrander's lead, passed with him under the torn folds of the curtain and through the narrow vestibule whose door was made of iron, into the room, where, in a stronger blaze of light than they had left, lay the body of the dead negro awaiting the last rites.

Would the judge pass this body, or turn away from it towards a door leading front? The sergeant had come in at the rear, but he greatly desired to go out front, as this would give him so much additional knowledge of the house. Unexpectedly to himself, the judge's intentions were in the direction of his own wishes. He was led front; and, entering an old-fashioned hall dimly lighted, passed a staircase and two closed doors, both of which gave him the impression of having been shut upon a past it had pleased no one to revive in many years.

Beyond them was the great front door of Colonial style and workmanship, a fine specimen once, but greatly disfigured now by the bolts and bars which had been added to it in satisfaction of the judge's ideas of security.

Many years had passed since Judge Ostrander had played the host; but he had not lost a sense of its obligations. It was for him to shoot the bolts and lift the bars; but he went about it so clumsily and with such evident aversion to the task, that the sergeant instinctively sprang to help him.

"I shall miss Bela at every turn," remarked the judge, turning with a sad smile as he finally pulled the door open. "This is an unaccustomed effort for me. Excuse my awkwardness."

Something in his attitude, something in the way he lifted his hand to push back a fallen lock from his forehead, impressed itself upon the sergeant's mind so vividly that he always remembered the judge as he appeared to him at that minute. Certainly there were but few men like him in the country, and none in his own town. Of

a commanding personality by reason of his height, his features were of a cast to express his mental attributes and enforce attention, and the incongruity between his dominating figure and the apprehensions which he displayed in these multiplied and extraordinary arrangements for personal security was forcible enough to arouse any man's interest.

The sergeant was so occupied by the mystery of the man and the mystery of the house that they had passed the first gate (which the judge had unlocked without much difficulty) before he realised that there still remained something of interest for him to see and to talk about later. The two dark openings on either side, raised questions which the most unimaginative mind would feel glad to hear explained. Ere the second gate swung open and he found himself again in the street, he had built up more than one theory in explanation of this freak of parallel fences with the strip of gloom between.

Would he have felt the suggestion of the spot still more deeply, had it been given him to see the anxious and hesitating figure which, immediately upon his departure entered this dark maze, and with feeling hands and cautious step, wound its way from corner to corner--now stopping abruptly to listen, now shrinking from some imaginary presence--a shadow among shadows--till it stood again between the gates from which it had started.

Possibly; even the hardiest of men respond to the unusual, and prove themselves not ungifted with imagination when brought face to face with that for which their experience furnishes no precedent.

## VI

### ACROSS THE BRIDGE

It was ten o'clock, not later, when the judge reentered his front door. He was alone,--absolutely alone, as he had never been since that night of long ago, when with the inner fence completed and the gates all locked, he turned to the great negro at his side and quietly said:

"We are done with the world, Bela. Are you satisfied to share this solitude with me?" And Bela had replied: "Night and day, your honour. And when you are not here,--when you are at court, to bear it alone."

And now this faithful friend was dead, and it was he who must bear it alone,--alone! How could he face it! He sought for no answer, nor did he allow himself to dwell for one minute on the thought. There was something else he must do first,--do this very night, if possible.

Taking down his hat from the rack he turned and went out again, this time carefully locking the door behind him, also the first gate. But he stopped to listen before lifting his hand to the

second one.

A sound of steady breathing, accompanied by a few impatient movements, came from the other side. A man was posted there within a foot of the gate. Noiselessly the judge recoiled, and made his way around to the other set of gates. Here all was quiet enough, and sliding quickly out, he cast a hasty glance up and down the lane, and seeing nothing more alarming than the back of a second officer lounging at the corner, pulled the gate quietly to, and locked it.

He was well down the road towards the ravine, before the officer turned.

The time has now come for giving you a clearer idea of this especial neighbourhood. Judge Ostrander's house, situated as you all know at the juncture of an unimportant road with the main highway, had in its rear three small houses, two of them let and one still unrented. Farther on, but on the opposite side of the way, stood a very old dwelling in which there lived and presumably worked, a solitary woman, the sole and final survivor of a large family. Beyond was the ravine, cutting across the road and terminating it. This ravine merits some description.

It was a picturesque addition to the town through which it cut at the point of greatest activity. With the various bridges connecting the residence portion with the lower business streets we have nothing to do. But there was a nearer one of which the demands of my story necessitate a clear presentation.

This bridge was called Long, and spanned the ravine and its shallow stream of water not a quarter of a mile below the short road or lane we have just seen Judge Ostrander enter. Between it and this lane, a narrow path ran amid the trees and bushes bordering the ravine. This path was seldom used, but when it was, it acted as a short cut to a certain part of the town mostly given over to factories. Indeed the road of which this bridge formed a part was called Factory on this account. Starting from the main highway a half mile or so below Ostrander Lane, it ran diagonally back to the bridge, where it received a turn which sent it south and east again towards the lower town. A high bluff rose at this point, which made the farther side of the ravine much more imposing than the one on the near side where the slope was gradual.

This path, and even the bridge itself, were almost wholly unlighted. They were seldom used at night--seldom used at any time. But it was by this route the judge elected to go into town; not for the pleasure of the walk, as was very apparent from the extreme depression of his manner, but from some inward necessity which drove him on, against his wishes, possibly against his secret misgivings.

He had met no one in his short walk down the lane, but for all that, he paused before entering the path just mentioned, to glance back and see if he were being watched or followed. When satisfied that he was not, he looked up, from the solitary waste where he stood, to the cheerless heavens and sighed; then forward into the mass of impenetrable shadow that he must yet traverse and

shuddered as many another had shuddered ere beginning this walk. For it was near the end of this path, in full sight of the bridge he must cross, that his friend, Algernon Etheridge, had been set upon and murdered so many years before; and the shadow of this ancient crime still lingered over the spot, deepening its natural gloom even for minds much less sympathetic and responsive to spiritual influences than Judge Ostrander.

But this shudder, whether premonitory or just the involuntary tribute of friend to friend, did not prevent his entering the path or following its line of shadow as it rose and dipped in its course down the gorge.

I have spoken of the cheerlessness of the heavens. It was one of those nights when the sky, piled thick with hurrying clouds, hangs above one like a pall. But the moon, hidden behind these rushing masses, was at its full, and the judge soon found that he could see his way better than he had anticipated--better than was desirable, perhaps. He had been on the descent of the path for some little time now, and could not be far from the more level ground which marked the approach to Long Bridge. Determined not to stop or to cast one faltering look to right or left, he hurried on with his eyes fixed upon the ground and every nerve braced to resist the influence of the place and its undying memories. But with the striking of his foot against the boards of the bridge, nature was too much for him, and his resolve vanished. Instead of hastening on, he stopped; and, having stopped, paused long enough to take in all the features of the scene, and any changes which time might have wrought. He even forced his shrinking eyes to turn and gaze upon the exact spot where his beloved Algernon had been found, with his sightless eyes turned to the sky.

This latter place, singular in that it lay open to the opposite bank without the mask of bush or tree to hide it, was in immediate proximity to the end of the bridge he had attempted to cross. It bore the name of Dark Hollow, and hollow and dark it looked in the universal gloom. But the power of its associations was upon him, and before he knew it, he was retracing his steps as though drawn by a magnetism he could not resist, till he stood within this hollow and possibly on the very foot of ground from the mere memory of which he had recoiled for years.

A moment of contemplation--a sigh, such as only escapes the bursting heart in moments of extreme grief or desolation--and he tore his eyes from the ground to raise them slowly but with deep meaning to where the high line of trees on the opposite side of the ravine met the grey vault of the sky. Darkness piled itself against darkness, but with a difference to one who knew all the undulations of this bluff and just where it ended in the sheer fall which gave a turn to the road at the farther end of the bridge.

But it was not upon the mass of undistinguishable tree-tops or the line they made against the sky that his gaze lingered. It was on something more material; something which rose from the brow of the hill in stark and curious outline not explainable in itself, but clear enough to one who had seen its shape by daylight. Judge Ostrander had thus seen it many times in the past, and knew just where to look for the one remaining chimney and solitary gable of

a house struck many years before by lightning and left a grinning shell to mock the eye of all who walked this path or crossed this bridge.

Black amid blackness, with just the contrast of its straight lines to the curve of natural objects about it, it commanded the bluff, summoning up memories of an evil race cut short in a moment by an outraged Providence, and Judge Ostrander marking it, found himself muttering aloud as he dragged himself slowly away: "Why should Time, so destructive elsewhere, leave one stone upon another of this accursed ruin?"

Alas! Heaven has no answer for such questions.

When he had reached the middle of the bridge, he stopped short to look back at Dark Hollow and utter in a smothered groan, which would not be repressed, a name which by all the rights of the spot should have been Algernon's, but was not.

The utterance of this name seemed to startle him, for, with a shuddering look around, he hastily traversed the rest of the bridge, and took the turn about the hill to where Factory Road branched off towards the town. Here he stopped again and for the first time revealed the true nature of his destination. For when he moved on again it was to take the road along the bluff, and not the one leading directly into town.

This meant a speedy passing by the lightning-struck house. He knew this of course, and evidently shrunk from the ordeal, for once up the hill and on the level stretch above, he resolutely forbore to cast a glance at its dilapidated fence and decayed gate posts. Had he not done this--had his eyes followed the long line of the path leading from these toppling posts to the face of the ruin, he would have been witness to a strange sight. For gleaming through the demolished heart of it,--between the chimney on the one side and the broken line of the gable on the other--could be seen the half circle of the moon suddenly released from the clouds which had hitherto enshrouded it. A weird sight, to be seen only when all conditions favoured. It was to be seen here to-night; but the judge's eye was bent another way, and he passed on, unnoting.

The ground was high along this bluff; almost fifty feet above the level of the city upon, which he had just turned his back. Of stony formation and much exposed to the elements, it had been considered an undesirable site by builders, and not a house was to be seen between the broken shell of the one he had just left, and the long, low, brilliantly illuminated structure ahead, for which he was evidently making. The sight of these lights and of the trees by which the house was surrounded, suggested festival and caused a qualm of indecision to momentarily disturb him in his purpose. But this purpose was too strong, and the circumstances too urgent for him to be deterred by anything less potent than a stroke of lightning. He rather increased his pace than slackened it and was rewarded by seeing lamp after lamp go out as he approached.

The pant of a dozen motors, the shouting of various farewells and then the sudden rushing forth of a long line of automobiles, proclaimed that the fete of the day was about over and that peace

and order would soon prevail again in Claymore Inn.

Without waiting for the final one to pass, the judge slid around to the rear and peered in at the kitchen door. If Mrs. Yardley were the woman he supposed her to be from the sergeant's description, she would be just then in the thick of the dish-washing. And it was Mrs. Yardley he wished to see.

Three women were at work in this busiest of scenes, and, deciding at a glance which was the able mistress of the house, he approached the large, pleasant and commanding figure piling plates at the farther end of the room and courteously remarked:

"Mrs. Yardley, I believe?"

The answer came quickly, and not without a curious smile of constraint:

"Oh, no. Mrs. Yardley is in the entry behind."

Bowing his thanks, he stepped in the direction named, just as the three women's heads came simultaneously together. There was reason for their whispers. His figure, his head, his face, were all unusual, and at that moment highly expressive, and coming as he did out of the darkness, his presence had an uncanny effect upon their simple minds. They had been laughing before; they ceased to laugh now. Why?

Meanwhile, Judge Ostrander was looking about him for Mrs. Yardley. The quiet figure of a squat little body blocked up a certain doorway.

"I am looking for Mrs. Yardley," he ventured.

The little figure turned; he was conscious of two very piercing eyes being raised to his, and heard in shaking accents, which yet were not the accents of weakness, the surprised ejaculation:

"Judge Ostrander!"

Next minute they were together in a small room, with the door shut behind them. The energy and decision of this mite of a woman were surprising.

"I was going--to you--in the morning--" she panted in her excitement. "To apologise," she respectfully finished.

"Then," said he, "it was your child who visited my house to-day?"

She nodded. Her large head was somewhat disproportioned to her short and stocky body. But her glance and manner were not unpleasing. There was a moment of silence which she hastened to break.

"Peggy is very young; it was not her fault. She is so young she doesn't even know where she went. She was found loitering around the bridge--a dangerous place for a child, but we've been very busy all day--and she was found there and taken along by--by the other person. I hope that you will excuse it, sir."

Was she giving the judge an opportunity to recover from his embarrassment, or was she simply making good her own cause? Whichever impulse animated her, the result was favourable to both. Judge Ostrander lost something of his strained look, and it was no longer difficult for her to meet his eye.

Nevertheless, what he had to say came with a decided abruptness.

"Who is the woman, Mrs. Yardley? That's what I have come to learn, and not to complain of your child."

The answer struck him very strangely, though he saw nothing to lead him to distrust her candour.

"I don't know, Judge Ostrander. She calls herself Averill, but that doesn't make me sure of her. You wonder that I should keep a lodger about whom I have any doubts, but there are times when Mr. Yardley uses his own judgment, and this is one of the times. The woman pays well and promptly," she added in a lower tone.

"Her status? Is she maid, wife or widow?"

"Oh, she says she is a widow, and I see every reason to believe her."

A slight grimness in her manner, the smallest possible edge to her voice, led the judge to remark:

"She's good-looking, I suppose."

A laugh, short and unmusical but not without a biting humour, broke unexpectedly from the landlady's lips.

"If she is, HE don't know it. He hasn't seen her."

"Not seen her?"

"No. Her veil was very thick the night she came and she did not lift it as long as he was by. If she had--"

"Well, what?"

"I'm afraid that he wouldn't have exacted as much from her as he did. She's one of those women--"

"Don't hesitate, Mrs. Yardley."

"I'm thinking how to put it. Who has her will of your sex, I might say. Now I'm not."

"Pretty?"

"Not like a girl, sir. She's old enough to show fade; but I don't believe that a man would mind that. She has a look--a way, that even women feel. You may judge, sir, if we, old stagers at the business, have been willing to take her in and keep her, at any price,--a woman who won't show her face except to me, and who will not leave her room without her veil and then only for walks in

places where no one else wants to go,--she must have some queer sort of charm to overcome all scruples. But she's gone too far to-day. She shall leave the Inn to-morrow. I promise you that, sir, whatever Samuel says. But sit down; sit down; you look tired, judge. Is there anything you would like? Shall I call Samuel?"

"No. I'm not much used to walking. Besides, I have had a great loss to-day. My man, Bela--" Then with his former abruptness: "Have you no idea who this Mrs. Averill is, or why she broke into my house?"

"There's but one explanation, sir. I've been thinking about it ever since I got wind of where she took my Peggy. The woman is not responsible. She has some sort of mania. Why else should she go into a strange gate just because she saw it open?"

"She hasn't confided in you?"

"No, sir. I haven't seen her since she brought Peggy back. We've had this big automobile party, and I thought my reckoning with her would keep. I heard about what had happened at your place from the man who brought us fruit."

"Mrs. Yardley, you've seen this woman's face?"

"Yes, I've seen her."

"Describe it more particularly."

"I can't. She has brown hair, brown eyes and a skin as white as milk; but that don't describe her. Lots of women have all that."

"No, it doesn't describe her." His manner seemed to pray for further details, but she stared back, unresponsive. In fact, she felt quite helpless. With a sigh of impatience, he resorted again to question.

"You speak of her as a stranger. Are you quite sure that she is a stranger to Shelby? You have not been so very many years here, and her constant wearing of a veil in-doors and out is very suspicious."

"So I'm beginning to think. And there is something else, judge, which makes me suspect you may be quite correct about her not being an entire stranger here. She knows this house too well."

The judge started. The strength of his self-control had relaxed a bit, and he showed in the look he cast about him what it had cost him to enter these doors.

"It is not the same, of course," continued Mrs. Yardley, affected in a peculiar way by the glimpse she had caught of the other's emotion unnatural and incomprehensible as it appeared to her. "The place has been greatly changed, but there is a certain portion of the old house left which only a person who knew it as it originally was would be apt to find; and yesterday, on going into one of these remote rooms I came upon her sitting in one of the windows looking out. How she got there or why she went, I cannot tell you. She didn't choose to tell me, and I didn't ask. But I've

not felt real easy about her since."

"Excuse me, Mrs. Yardley, it may be a matter of no moment, but do you mind telling me where this room is?"

"It's on the top floor, sir; and it looks out over the ravine. Perhaps she was spying out the path to your house."

The judge's face hardened. He felt baffled and greatly disturbed; but he spoke kindly enough when he again addressed Mrs. Yardley:

"I am as ignorant as you of this woman's personality and of her reasons for intruding into my presence this morning. But there is something so peculiar about this presumptuous attempt of hers at an interview, that I feel impelled to inquire into it more fully, even if I have to approach the only source of information capable of giving me what I want--that is, herself. Mrs. Yardley, will you procure me an immediate interview with this woman? I am sure that you can be relied upon to do this and to do it with caution. You have the countenance of a woman unusually discreet."

The subtle flattery did its work. She was not blind to the fact that he had introduced it for that very purpose, but it was not in her nature to withstand any appeal from so exalted a source however made. Lifting her eyes fearlessly to his, she responded earnestly:

"I am proud to serve you. I will see what I can do. Will you wait here for just a few minutes?"

He bowed quietly enough; but he was very restless when once he found himself alone. Those few minutes of waiting seemed interminable to him. Would the woman come? Was she as anxious to see him now as she had been in the early morning? Much depended on her mood, but more on the nature of the errand which had taken her into his house. If that errand was a vital one, he would soon hear her steps; indeed, he was hearing her steps now--he was sure of it. Those of Mrs. Yardley were quicker, shorter, more businesslike. These, now advancing through the corridor, lingered as if held back by dread or a fateful indecision.

He would fain hasten them, but discretion forbade.

They faltered, turned, then, in an instant, all hesitation was lost in purpose and they again advanced this time to the threshold. Judge Ostrander had just time to brace himself to meet the unknown, when the door fell back and the woman of the morning appeared in the opening.

VII

WITH HER VEIL DOWN

On the instant he recognised that no common interview lay before him. She was still the mysterious stranger, and she still wore her

veil--a fact all the more impressive that it was no longer the accompaniment of a hat, but flung freely over her bare head. He frowned as he met her eyes through this disguising gauze. This attempt at an incognito for which there seemed to be no adequate reason, had a theatrical look wholly out of keeping with the situation. But he made no allusion to it, nor was the bow with which he acknowledged her presence and ushered her into the room, other than courteous. Nevertheless, she was the first to speak.

"This is very good of you, Judge Ostrander," she remarked, in a voice both cultured and pleasant. "I could hardly have hoped for this honour. After what happened this morning at your house, I feared that my wish for an interview would not only be disregarded by you, but that you would utterly refuse me the privilege of seeing you. I own to feeling greatly relieved. Such consideration shown to a stranger, argues a spirit of unusual kindness."

A tirade. He simply bowed.

"Or perhaps I am mistaken in my supposition," she suggested, advancing a step, but no more. "Perhaps I am no stranger to you? Perhaps you know my name?"

"Averill? No."

She paused, showing her disappointment quite openly. Then drawing up a chair, she leaned heavily on its back, saying in low, monotonous tones from which the former eager thrill had departed:

"I see that the intended marriage of your son has made very little impression upon you."

Aghast for the moment, this was such a different topic from the one he expected, the judge regarded her in silence before remarking:

"I have known nothing of it. My son's concerns are no longer mine. If you have broken into my course of life for no other purpose than to discuss the affairs of Oliver Ostrander, I must beg you to excuse me. I have nothing to say in his connection to you or to any one."

"Is the breach between you so deep as that!"

This she said in a low tone and more as if to herself than to him. Then, with a renewal of courage indicated by the steadying of her form and a spirited uplift of her head, she observed with a touch of command in her voice:

"There are some things which must be discussed whatever our wishes or preconceived resolves. The separation between you and Mr. Oliver Ostrander cannot be so absolute (since whatever your cause of complaint you are still his father and he your son) that you will allow his whole life's happiness to be destroyed for the lack of a few words between yourself and me."

He had made his bow, and he now proceeded to depart, severity in his face and an implacable resolution in his eye. But some impulse made him stop; some secret call from deeply hidden, possibly

unrecognised, affections gave him the will to say:

"A plea uttered through a veil is like an unsigned message. It partakes too much of the indefinite. Will you lift your veil, madam?"

"In a minute," she assured him. "The voice can convey truth as certainly as the features. I will not deny you a glimpse of the latter after you have heard my story. Will you hear it, judge? Issues of no common importance hang upon your decision. I entreat--but no, you are a just man; I will rely upon your sense of right. If your son's happiness fails to appeal to you, let that of a young and innocent girl lovely as few are lovely either in body or mind."

"Yourself, madam?"

"No, my daughter! Oliver Ostrander has done us that honour, sir. He had every wish and had made every preparation to marry my child, when--Shall I go on?"

"You may."

It was shortly said, but a burden seemed to fall from her shoulders at its utterance. Her whole graceful form relaxed swiftly into its natural curves, and an atmosphere of charm from this moment enveloped her, which justified the description of Mrs. Yardley, even without a sight of the features she still kept hidden.

"I am a widow, sir." Thus she began with studied simplicity. "With my one child I have been living in Detroit these many years,--ever since my husband's death, in fact. We are not unliked there, nor have we lacked respect. When some six months ago, your son, who stands high in every one's regard, as befits his parentage and his varied talents, met my daughter and fell seriously in love with her, no one, so far as I know, criticised his taste or found fault with his choice. I was happy, after many years of anxiety; for I idolised my child and I had suffered from many apprehensions as to her future. Not that I had the right to be happy; I see that now. A woman with a secret,--and my heart held a woful and desperate one,--should never feel that that secret lacks power to destroy her because it has long lain quiescent. I thought my child safe, and rejoiced as any woman might rejoice, and as I would rejoice now, if Fate were to obliterate that secret and emancipate us all from the horror of it."

She paused, waiting for some acknowledgment of his interest, but not getting it, went on bitterly enough, for his stolidity was a very great mystery to her:

"And she WAS safe, to all appearance, up to the very morning of her marriage--the marriage of which you say you had received no intimation though Oliver seems a very dutiful son."

"Madam!"--The hoarseness of his tone possibly increased its peremptory character--"I really must ask you to lay aside your veil."

It was a rebuke and she felt it to be so; but though she blushed behind her veil, she did not remove it.

"Pardon me," she begged and very humbly, "but I cannot yet. You will see why later.--Let me reveal my secret first. I am coming to it, Judge Ostrander; I cannot keep it back much longer."

He was too much of a gentleman to insist upon his wishes, but she saw by the gloom of his eye and a certain nervous twitching of his hands that it was not from mere impassiveness that his features had acquired their rigidity. Smitten with compunction, she altered her tone into one more deprecatory:

"My story will be best told," she now said, "if I keep all personal element out of it. You must imagine Reuther, dressed in her wedding finery, waiting for her bridegroom to take her to church. We were sitting, she and I, in our little parlour, watching the clock,--for it was very near the hour. At times, her face turned towards me for a brief moment, and I felt all the pang of motherhood again, for her loveliness was not of this earth but of a land where there is no sin, no--There! the memory was a little too much for me, sir; but I'll not transgress again; the future holds too many possibilities of suffering for me to dwell upon the past. She was lovely and her loveliness sprang from a pure hope. We will let that suffice, and what I dreaded was not what happened, inexcusable as such blindness and presumption may appear in a woman who has had her troubles and seen the desperate side of life.

"A carriage had driven up; and we heard his step; but it was not the step of a bridegroom, Judge Ostrander, nor was the gentleman he left behind him at the kerb, the friend who was to stand up with him. To Reuther, innocent of all deception, this occasioned only surprise, but to me it meant the end of Reuther's marriage and of my own hopes. I shrank from the ordeal and stood with my back half turned when, dashed by his own emotions, he bounded into our presence.

"One look my way and his question was answered before he put it. Judge Ostrander, the name under which I had lived in Detroit was not my real one. I had let him court and all but marry my daughter, without warning him in any way of what this deception on my part covered. But others--one other, I have reason now to believe--had detected my identity under the altered circumstances of my new life, and surprised him with the news at this late hour. We are--Judge Ostrander, you know who we are. This is not the first time you and I have seen each other face to face." And lifting up a hand, trembling with emotion, she put aside her veil.

VIII

WITH HER VEIL LIFTED

"MRS.--"

"You recognise me?"

"Too well." The tone was deep with meaning but there was no accusation in it; nor was there any note of relief. It was more as if some hope deeply, and perhaps unconsciously, cherished had suffered a sudden and complete extinction.

The change this made in him was too perceptible for her not to observe it. The shadow lying deep in her eyes now darkened her whole face. She had tried to prepare him for this moment; tried to prepare herself. But who can prepare the soul for the return of old troubles or make other than startling the resurrection of a ghost laid, as men thought, forever.

"You see that it was no fault of my own I was trying to hide," she finally remarked in her rich and sympathetic voice.

"Put back your veil."

It was all he said.

Trembling she complied, murmuring as she fumbled with its folds:

"Disgrace to an Ostrander! I know that I was mad to risk it for a moment. Forgive me for the attempt, and listen to my errand. Oliver was willing to marry my child, even after he knew the shame it would entail. But Reuther would not accept the sacrifice. When she learned, as she was obliged to now, that her father had not only been sentenced to death for the worst crime in the calendar, but had suffered the full penalty, leaving only a legacy of eternal disgrace to his wife and innocent child, she showed a spirit becoming a better parentage. In his presence, and in spite of his dissuasions (for he acted with all the nobility one might expect) she took off her veil with her own hands and laid it aside with a look expressive of eternal renunciation. She loves him, sir; and there is no selfishness in her heart and never has been. For all her frail appearance and the mildness of her temper, she is like flint where principle is involved or the welfare of those she loves is at stake. My daughter may die from shock or shame, but she will never cloud your son's prospects with the obloquy which has settled over her own. Judge Ostrander, I am not worthy of such a child, but such she is. If John--"

"We will not speak his name," broke in Judge Ostrander, assuming a peremptory bearing quite unlike his former one of dignified reserve. "I should like to hear, instead, your explanation of how my son became inveigled into an engagement of which you, if no one else, knew the preposterous nature."

"Judge Ostrander, you do right to blame me. I should never have given my consent, never. But I thought our past so completely hidden--our identity so entirely lost under the accepted name of Averill."

"You thought!" He towered over her in his anger. He looked and acted as in the old days, when witnesses cowered under his eye and voice. "Say that you KNEW, madam; that you planned this unholy trap for my son. You had a pretty daughter, and you saw to it that she came under his notice; nay, more, ignoring the claims of

decency, you allowed the folly to proceed, if you did not help it on in your misguided ambition to marry your daughter well."

"Judge Ostrander, I did not plan their meeting, nor did I at first encourage his addresses. Not till I saw the extent of their mutual attachment, did I yield to the event and accept the consequences. But I was wrong, wholly wrong to allow him to visit her a second time; but now that the mischief is done--"

Judge Ostrander was not listening.

"I have a question to put you," said he, when he realised that she had ceased speaking. "Oliver was never a fool. When he was told who your daughter was, what did he say of the coincidence which made him the lover of the woman against whose father, his father had uttered a sentence of death? Didn't he marvel and call it extraordinary--the work of the devil?"

"Possibly; but if he did, it was not in any conversation he had with me."

"Detroit is a large city and must possess hundreds of sweet young girls within its borders. Could he contemplate without wonder the fact that he had been led to the door of the one above all others between whom and himself Fate had set such an insurmountable barrier? He must have been struck deeply by the coincidence; he must have been, madam."

Astonished at his manner, at the emphasis he placed upon this point which seemed to her so much less serious than many others, she regarded him doubtfully before saying:

"I was if he was not. From the very first I wondered. But I got used to the fact during the five months of his courtship. And I got used to another fact too; that my secret was safe so far as it ran the risk of being endangered by a meeting with yourself. Mr. Ostrander made it very plain to us that we need never expect to see you in Detroit."

"He did? Did he offer any explanation for this lack of--of sympathy between us?"

"Never. It was a topic he forbore to enter into and I think he only said what he did, to prevent any expectations on our part of ever seeing you."

"And your daughter? Was he as close-mouthed in speaking of me to her as he was to you?"

"I have no doubt of it. Reuther betrays no knowledge of you or of your habits, and has never expressed but one curiosity in your regard. As you can imagine what that is, I will not mention it."

"You are at liberty to. I have listened to much and can well listen to a little more."

"Judge, she is of a very affectionate nature and her appreciation of your son's virtues is very great. Though her conception of yourself is naturally a very vague one, it is only to be expected

that she should wonder how you could live so long without a visit from Oliver."

Expectant as he was of this reply, and resolved as he was, to hear it unmoved, he had miscalculated his strength or his power of concealment, for he turned aside immediately upon hearing it, and walked away from her towards the further extremity of the room. Covertly she watched him; first through her veil, and then with it partly removed. She did not understand his mood; and she hardly understood her own. When she entered upon this interview, her mind had been so intent upon one purpose that it seemed to absorb all her faculties and reach every corner of her heart; yet here she was, after the exchange of many words between them, with her purpose uncommunicated and her heart unrelieved, staring at him not in the interest of her own griefs, but in commiseration of his.

Yet when he faced her once more every thought vanished from her mind save the one which had sustained her through the extraordinary measures she had taken to secure herself this opportunity of presenting her lost cause to the judgment of the only man from whom she could expect aid.

But her impulse was stayed and her thoughts sent wandering again by the penetrating look he gave her before she let her veil fall again.

"How long have you been in Detroit?" he asked.

"Ever since--"

"And how old is Reuther?"

"Eighteen, but--"

"Twelve years ago, then." He paused and glanced about him before adding, "She was about the age of the child you brought to my house today."

"Yes, sir, very nearly."

His lips took a strange twist. There was self-contempt in it, and some other very peculiar and contradictory emotion. But when this semblance of a smile had passed, it was no longer Oliver's father she saw before her, but the county's judge. Even his tone partook of the change as he dryly remarked:

"What you have told me concerning your daughter and my son is very interesting. But it was not for the simple purpose of informing me that this untoward engagement was at an end that you came to Shelby. You have another purpose. What is it? I can remain with you just five minutes longer."

Five minutes! It only takes one to kill a hope but five are far too few for the reconstruction of one. But she gave no sign of her secret doubts, as she plunged at once into her subject.

"I will be brief," said she; "as brief as any mother can be who is pleading for her daughter's life as well as happiness. Reuther has

no real ailment, but her constitution is abnormally weak, and she will die of this grief if some miracle does not save her. Strong as her will is, determined as she is to do her duty at all cost, she has very little physical stamina. See! here is her photograph taken but a short time ago. Look at it I beg. See what she was like when life was full of hope; and then imagine her with all hope eliminated."

"Excuse me. What use? I can do nothing. I am very sorry for the child, but--" His very attitude showed his disinclination to look at the picture.

But she would not be denied. She thrust it upon him and once his eyes had fallen upon it, they clung there though evidently against his will. Ah, she knew that Reuther's exquisite countenance would plead for itself! God seldom grants to such beauty, so lovely a spirit. If the features themselves failed to appeal, certainly he must feel the charm of an expression which had already netted so many hearts. Breathlessly she watched him, and, as she watched, she noted the heavy lines carved in his face by thought and possibly by sorrow, slowly relax and his eyes fill with a wistful tenderness.

In the egotism of her relief, she thought to deepen the impression she had made by one vivid picture of her daughter as she was now. Mistaking his temperament or his story, classing him in with other strong men, the well of whose feeling once roused overflows in sympathetic emotion, she observed very gently but, as she soon saw, unwisely:

"Such delicacy can withstand a blow, but not a steady heartbreak. When, on that dreadful night I crept in from my sleepless bed to see how my darling was bearing her long watch, this was what I saw. She had not moved, no, not an inch in the long hours which had passed since I left her. She had not even stirred the hand from which, at her request, I had myself drawn her engagement ring. I doubt even if her lids had shut once over her strained and wide-staring eyes. It was as if she were laid out for her grave--"

"Madam!"

The harsh tone recalled her to herself. She took back the picture he was holding towards her and was hardly surprised when he said:

"Parents must learn to endure bitterness. I have not been exempt myself from such. Your child will not die. You have years of mutual companionship before you, while I have nothing. And now let us end this interview so painful to both. You have said--"

"No," she broke in with sudden vehemence, all the more startling from the restraint in which she had--held herself up to this moment, "I have not said--I have not begun to say what seethes like a consuming fire in my breast. Judge Ostrander, I do not know what has estranged you from Oliver. It must be something serious;- -for you are both good men. But whatever it is, of this I am certain: you would not wilfully deliver an innocent child like mine to a wretched fate which a well-directed effort might avert. I spoke of a miracle--Will you not listen, judge? I am not wild; I am not unconscious of presumption. I am only in earnest, in deadly

earnest. A miracle is possible. The gulf between these two may yet be spanned. I see a way--"

What change was this to which she had suddenly become witness? The face which had not lost all its underlying benignancy even when it looked its coldest, had now become settled and hard. His manner was absolutely repellent as he brok

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