

Where had he noticed the same peculiarity before?). "You never expected to hear from me again," he read on slowly, "but now the time has come. You thought your baby died, but she didn't. That would have been too good. She's alive all right, and going down to hell like my poor girl that your Stores ruined. My girl was a shop girl. Your girl is a shop girl, too. Where my girl went, your girl is going. When she's lost forever like my girl was I'll tell you. You can have her then if you want. But you can't save her. The end will come soon now. I'll let you know when. Never say one mother didn't get her revenge. To show you I speak the truth I send you her ring."

Mechanically he shook the dirty envelope and there rolled out upon the polished table a baby's gold ring set with a pearl. He knew that ring well. He grasped it with a choking sound. It rolled away from him, falling, and hiding itself among the rich rugs upon the floor. After staring a moment he fell upon his knees, searching with frantic eagerness—it was such a tiny thing, so easily lost, so frail a thing, so easy to trample under foot. He thought only of the ring, he did not dare to let his thoughts stray from it. There was something else, something horrible—unthinkable—something about the child who had once worn the tiny ring. He dared not think of that—only of the ring. But the ring, so small, so frail, eluded him—he could not find it.

When, later, the stolid Benson came in with the respectable information that Mr. Jones had returned, he thought that the library was empty. Then suddenly he saw his master lying face downwards among the crumpled rugs upon the floor.

## CHAPTER XX.

AGAIN, as if, in defiance of aphorism, history were taking pleasure in repeating itself, the servants in the Torrance house went about with frightened faces. Of the strange seizure which had overtaken the master the night before they had no explanation, but real tragedy brings with it an atmosphere as palpable yet as penetrating as the air we breathe. Mr. Johnson, the detective, felt it as he sat in the library, waiting. He had scented calamity from the moment of coming into the house, and now Mr. Torrance entered with its history writ large upon his haggard face. As once before upon entering that room, he came slowly, and in his hand he held a scrap of dirty paper; only this time he left no distracted woman upstairs; whatever the burden was, it was one which he must carry alone.

The two men shook hands in silence. Both were thinking of that other meeting and the memory weighed. The detective was the first to recover himself. He cleared his throat delicately.

"Nothing very wrong, I hope, sir?" he said. "You are not looking yourself. Must have had a nasty shock. They tell me—"

"I fainted? Yes. I believe I did. It was very sudden—the shock. But I am quite recovered. Physically I am well, but I cannot answer for my mind if—something is not done." His firm lips trembled—a bad sign.

"Something shall certainly be done, at once," declared the detective calmly. "As you say, it will be better not to prolong the—the suspense. If you will tell me just exactly how things are." He sat down comfortably and crossed his feet with a show of ease.

"First, do you remember the other occasion upon which your help was needed? Do you remember the details?"

"Certainly. It is my business to do so. Before coming here I looked up the whole case. I keep a full record of all my cases, even such as appear to be settled."

"Ah—yes. Such as appear to be settled. We thought that case was settled—"

"Excuse me," interposed the detective neatly, "you thought."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that it was you, if you remember, Mr. Torrance, who thought that the case was settled. When you received the letter announcing the death of the child you were convinced that the child was dead. It was a matter of conviction, not of proof."

"I was convinced," said Adam Torrance. "Do you imply that you were not convinced also?"

"For argument's sake we will say that I was, although, as a matter of fact, I am never certain of any death until the law, so to speak, has passed upon the body. This child's body was never found, therefore, speaking from a professional standpoint, I could not go so far as to say that the case was definitely closed."

"That is beside the point. As a matter of fact we both were convinced that the child had been murdered or had been allowed to die in revenge for a real or fancied wrong. What we might have done had we not been so convinced I cannot say. I dare not think. If I should once begin to reproach myself with negligence or too much credulity at that time I should go mad. At present I am still sane and I know that I was blameless in the matter. Let us put it aside if I am to retain my senses."

"I think you are wise," said Mr. Johnson quietly. "Let us begin all over again. You have another

letter? I have the first here. I have brought it with me."

The two men placed the slips of paper under the reading lamp side by side. In silence the detective read the scrawled words of the second letter. "My God!" he said.

"Is the writing the same?" asked Mr. Torrance dully. His hand did not shake as he spread the papers out more carefully. They went over them together.

At first glance it could be seen that the paper was different, the ink different, but, allowing for the fact that the second letter was much more shaky than the first, more soiled and more blurred, the writer of them both was undoubtedly the same.

Adam Torrance wiped a cold sweat from his forehead. "That proves it," he said. "I felt that it was the same. Now I know. The same fiend wrote both the letters."

The detective's examination was more minute, but his conclusion was similar.

"It is undoubtedly the same," he declared. "The hand that wrote this second letter is older, and more unsteady with continual drinking or illness—drink, I should say—the paper smells of it. The envelope is poorer, probably the sender is poorer also. The ink is thick and old—like the ink in a bottle seldom used; perhaps a bottle in some third



"The corner of a crowded street car is as good a place as another for the reading of a letter."

rate eating house or tavern; the pen has been almost past its use. All these things might be feigned, but I am inclined to believe them genuine. If there is anything in the story at all they must be genuine, for the person writing must by her own story be in the depths of poverty and degradation. Yes, I think we must consider them genuine."

Adam Torrance moistened his dry lips. "And where does that lead us?"

"Nowhere—at present. But it shows us that we must look for our party in the slums, among the very poor."

"The party who wrote the letter?"

"The party who wrote the letter."

"You have not told me what you think of the letter itself—of the truth of its assertions, I mean."

"My dear Mr. Torrance, I do not know what to think. The letter appears to be genuine. It is horrible enough. We must do our best to find the writer."

Again Mr. Torrance moistened his dry lips.

"If the letter is genuine, the assertions stand at least a chance of being true. There is at least a chance that my daughter is alive to-day. That she is a young girl at an age which needs every loving safeguard, that she is somewhere in this city—"

"Now—go easy. You'll break down if you go

on like that. Don't imagine. Refuse to imagine. Get down to facts. There may be nothing in this at all. If there is, we will soon find it out. Stick to that. What makes you imagine that she may be hidden in this city?"

"I don't know—a feeling. It came to me last night. The fiend who wrote the letters is here. This letter was delivered by hand, slipped in the letter box. See, it has never been through the mail at all. Would she not in her morbid revenge have the girl under her own eye? Would she not add zest to her revenge by having my daughter within reach of my hand and yet so utterly beyond me? I tell you, Johnson, I believe that, if we find her at all, we shall find her in this city."

"You may be right. The first thing to do is to offer a large reward for information leading to the finding of the person who dropped a letter in the letter box of this house. Money is no object, I suppose? It gives us a chance, for, if the letter-writer did not venture here herself, someone ventured for her. And it will be a queer thing if money will not make that someone speak. Of course, if she brought it herself, we lose that chance. But it is worth taking. You have questioned the servants?"

"Yes, they know absolutely nothing."

"Well, I'll question them again. I'll mention that there is a reward. It may help."

But no persuasions of the bland Mr. Johnson, and no offer of reward could extract from the servants information which they did not have. Whoever had brought the letter had managed to bring it unseen and unheard; some time while the master of the house, in the character of benefactor, had chatted with the sisters at the House of Windows, or while, in the character of ice cream man, he had brought Paradise to Brook Street, a sinister shadow had flitted by, leaving this dreadful thing in its wake.

"They don't know anything," said Johnson, at last. "We will insert the reward in the papers at once. Then we will go through the stores of this city with a sieve. How is it with your own Stores? Any record kept of the family connection of its employees?"

"Yes, there is supposed to be a complete record."

"We'll hope the others are the same. We'll sift them out. We'll investigate all orphans, all adoptions, all households which have anything at all irregular in their families. It can be done quietly and without giving offence. Not until we know the parentage of every girl in every store in the city shall we be justified in concluding that she is not among them."

"But think of the time?"

"With money we can shorten time. It will not be a long job at all if I can have all the help I'll need. The cases needing special investigation will be comparatively few. You yourself are not in touch with any of your employees, I suppose?"

"No. That is, I have not been up until the present. But since my return from abroad I have been personally looking into the management of the Stores. I have met only one family personally. It is a family of three sisters—the name of Brown. The eldest sister is ill, and the youngest sister is taking her place in the Stores. The other sister is—is blind."

"No one else in the family. No adopted child?"

"No."

"Well, that is one family off our list. We will begin at once. The age of the lost child would be sixteen? Is that right?"

"She would be seventeen next May."

"That narrows our search still more."

For although it would be unlikely that the child would know her proper birthday, she would probably be aware of her age within the limit of a year. Things look brighter than I had expected. Perhaps the old hag who wrote the letter has given us all the clue we need in telling us that the girl we seek is working in a store. I fancy that she does not mean a small store, such a store as might employ one clerk or two or three. Far more likely the girl is lost in one of our great departmentals, where she is one of a hundred, a tiny spoke, almost lost to sight in turning the immense wheel. That is probably what the woman's own daughter was—stay. It is what she was, for was she not employed in your own Stores?"

He pocketed his notebook and picked up his hat with a brisk air of confidence and, so potent in suggestion, that for the first time since the shock of the letter, Adam Torrance felt something like hope. "Do not spare money," he said. "Thank God, there is plenty. But you must let me help too. I could not stand the suspense otherwise. And I have telegraphed for Mark—Mark Wareham, my adopted son."

"Oh," said the detective, pausing and darting a keen look at the other. "I did not know that—er—"

"That I had adopted Mark? At least, it is the same thing. He has been like a son to me for years. But, don't mistake—if my child is found, no one would rejoice more than Mark."

"Um-m," said Mr. Johnson. "Just so. Let me see—is Mr. Wareham a nephew?"

"No. He calls me Uncle, but if we come down to actual relationship, he is only a distant cousin."

"Independent fortune?"

"None. But you mistake if you think that Mark