

The Last Stroke.

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Author of "A Woman's Crime," "John Arthur's Ward,"

"The Diamond Coterie," "Against Odds," Etc.

CONTRIBUTED

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And did you see me this morning?"

"No." "Still I passed this spot at eight o'clock, I think, perhaps, earlier. My physician has cautioned me against long drives and this morning I did not go quite so far as usual, because on yesterday I went too far. I had turned my pony toward home just beyond that pretty mill where the little streams join the lake, and was driving slowly homeward when this Mr. Doran is not that right?—this Mr. Doran stopped me to ask if I had seen a man, a tall, fair man."

"And had you?"

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

"How tall was he?"

"Mrs. Jamieson drew back a little and looked into the girl's face with strange intentness. "I fear he was a friend of yours," she said in a strangely hesitating manner, her eyes swiftly scanning the pale face.

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

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

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

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

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

"No strong suddenly to her feet. "You must not faint. If you do, I—I cannot help you; I am not strong enough."

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

Mrs. Jamieson stood looking after her for a moment, as if in doubt and wonder, then she put up an unsteady hand and drew down the fuzzy well folded bank from her close-fitting morning bonnet.

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

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

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

For fully fifteen minutes after Hilda Grant had reached the empty solitude of her own schoolroom she stood crouched against the near wall, her hands clinched and hanging straight at her side, her eyes fixed on space. Then, with eyes still tearful, but with dry sobs breaking from her throat, she tottered to her seat before the desk, and let her face fall forward upon her arms, moaning from time to time like some hurt animal, and so heedless of all about her that she did not hear a light step in the hall without nor

the approach of the man who paused in the doorway to gaze at her in troubled surprise.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Who are you?" she faltered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I am Hilda Grant," she said brokenly.

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I am Hilda Grant, she said brokenly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER III.

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

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

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

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

The two men moved a few steps away, and then the doctor said: "I must be brief. You know, do you not, the theory, that of these men, as to the cause of this calamity?"

"It was an accident, of course."

"They make it that, or suicide."

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

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

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

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

"The back! And that means—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It lay less than six feet from the very water's edge, the body of a tall, slender young man, with a delicate, high-bred face that had been fair when living, and was now marble-white, save for the blood-stains upon the right temple, where the bullet had entered. The hair, of that soft blonde color, seen oftenest upon the heads of children, and rarely upon adults, was thick and fine, and long enough to frame the handsome face in close half rings that no barber's skill could ever subdue or make straight. The hands were long, slender, and soft as a woman's; the feet small and arched, and the form, beneath the loose out-

lines of the blue flannel fatigue suit, in which it was clad, white slender and full of grace, was well built and not lacking in muscle.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Robert Brierly turned and looked at this friend in need full in the face for a moment; then he lifted his hand to

brush a sudden moisture from his eye.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Doctor," Robert Brierly bent toward the other and placed a hand upon his knee. "There are emergencies which bring men together and reveal them, each to each, in a flash, as it were. I cannot feel that you know me really, but I know you, and would trust you with my dearest possession, or my most dangerous secret. You will be frank with me, I know, if you speak at all; and I want you to tell me something."

"What is it?"

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

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

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

"And she will receive me?"

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

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

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

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

"Be with you at 6.20."

"Ferrars,"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Someone has made haste," he said, scornfully.

"Someone always does in these cases, and the Journal has a special correspondent in every town and village in the county, almost. It was only a few hours."

He glanced at his watch, and his companion as he spoke, "and it was reported an accident or suicide."

"It was a murder!"

"I thought so."

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

"Yes."

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

"No, no."

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

"Can that be managed?"

"I think so."

Brierly was now nervously eager. He seemed to have shaken off the stupor which had first seized to seize upon and hold him, had his questions and suggestions came thick and fast. It ended, of course, in his putting himself into the doctor's