



Some one—it was beyond question now—was in the house with him.

all I knew then—be you. I have the deed down-town and will give it to you. The house is yours in fee simple, given you by your father, not bequeathed to you by him to become your property after his death. He meant by that, I think, even more than the mere acknowledgment that he is your father."

Sherrill walked to the window and stood as though looking out, but his eyes were blank with thought.

"For almost twenty years," he said, "your father, as I have told you, lived in that house practically alone; during all those years a shadow of some sort was over him. I don't know at all, Alan, what that shadow was. But it is certain that whatever it was that had changed him from the man he was when I first knew him culminated three days ago when he wrote to you. It may be that the consequences of his writing to you were such that, after he had sent the letter, he could not bring himself to face them and so has merely . . . gone away. In that case, as we stand here talking, he is still alive. On the other hand, his writing you may have precipitated something that I know nothing of. In either case, if he has left anywhere any evidence of what it is that changed and oppressed him for all these years, or if there is any evidence of what has happened to him now, it will be found in his house."

SHERRILL turned back to Alan. "It is for you—not me, Alan," he said, simply, "to make that search. I have thought seriously about it, this last half hour, and have decided that is as he would want it—perhaps as he did want it—to be. He could have told me what his trouble was any time in these twenty years, if he had been willing I should know; but he never did."

Sherrill was silent for a moment.

"There are some things your father did just before he disappeared that I have not told you yet," he went on. "The reason I have not told them is that I have not yet fully decided in my own mind what action they call for from me. I can assure you, however, that it would not help you now in any way to know them."

He thought again; then glanced to the key on the dresser and seemed to recollect.

"That key," he said, "is one I made your father give me some time ago; he was at home alone so much that I was afraid something might happen to him there. He gave it me because he knew I would not misuse it. I used it, for the first time, three days ago, when, after becoming certain something had gone wrong with him, I went to the house to search for him; my daughter used it this morning when she went there to wait for you. Your father, of course, had a key to the front door like this one;

his servant has a key to the servants' entrance. I do not know of any other keys."

"The servant is in charge there now?" Alan asked.

"Just now there is no one in the house. The servant, after your father disappeared, thought that, if he had merely gone away, he might have gone back to his birthplace near Manistique, and he went up there to look for him. I had a wire from him to-day that he had not found him and was coming back."

Sherrill waited a moment to see whether there was anything more Alan wanted to ask; then he went out.

CHAPTER IV.

"Arrived Safe; Well."

AS the door closed behind Sherrill, Alan went over to the dresser and picked up the key which Sherrill had left. It was, he saw, a flat key of a sort common twenty years before, not of the more recent corrugated shape. As he looked at it and then away from it, thoughtfully turning it over and over in his fingers, it brought no sense of possession to him. Sherrill had said the house was his, had been given him by his father; but that fact could not actually make it his in his realization. He could not imagine himself owning such a house or what he would do with it if it were his. He put the key, after a moment, on the ring with two or three other keys he had, and dropped them into his pocket; then he crossed to a chair and sat down.

He found, as he tried now to disentangle the events of the afternoon, that from them, and especially from his last interview with Sherrill, two facts stood out most clearly. The first of these related more directly to his father—to Benjamin Corvet. When such a man as Benjamin Corvet must have been, disappears—when, without warning and without leaving any account of himself he vanishes from among those who knew him—the persons most closely interested pass through three stages of anxiety. They doubt first whether the disappearance is real and whether inquiry on their part will not be resented; they waken next to realization that the man is actually gone, and that something must be done; the third stage is open and public inquiry. Whatever might be the nature of the information Sherrill was withholding from him, Alan saw that its effect on Sherrill had been to shorten very greatly Sherrill's time of doubt as to Corvet's actual disappearance. The Sherrills—particularly Sherrill himself—had been in the second stage of anxiety when Alan came; they had been awaiting Alan's arrival in the belief that Alan could give them information which would show them what must be "done" about Corvet. Alan had not been able to give them this information; but his coming, and his interview with Sherrill, had strongly influenced Sherrill's attitude. Sherrill had shrunk, still more definitely and consciously, after that, from prying into the affairs of his friend; he had now, strangely, almost withdrawn himself from the inquiry, and had given it over to Alan.

Sherrill had spoken of the possibility that something might have "happened" to Corvet; but it was plain he did not believe he had met with actual violence. He had left it to Alan to examine Corvet's house; but he had not urged Alan to examine it at once; he had left the time of the examination to be determined by Alan. This showed clearly that Sherrill believed—perhaps had sufficient reason for believing—that Corvet had simply "gone away." The second of Alan's two facts related even more closely and personally to Alan himself. Corvet, Sherrill had said, had married in 1889. But Sherrill in long knowledge of his friend, had shown firm conviction that there had been no mere vulgar

liaison in Corvet's life. Did this mean that there might have been some previous marriage of Alan's father—some marriage which had strangely overlapped and nullified his public marriage? In that case, Alan could be, not only in fact, but legally, Corvet's son; and such things as this, Alan knew, had sometimes happened, and had happened by a strange combination of events, innocently for all parties. Corvet's public separation from his wife, Sherrill had said, had taken place in 1897, but the actual separation between them might, possibly, have taken place long before that.

Alan resolved to hold these questions in abeyance; he would not accept or grant the stigma which his relationship to Corvet seemed to attach to himself until it had been proved to him. He had come to Chicago expecting, not to find that there had never been anything wrong, but to find that the wrong had been righted in some way at last. But what was most plain of all to him, from what Sherrill had told him, was that the wrong—whatever it might be—had not been righted; it existed still.

The afternoon had changed swiftly into night; dusk had been gathering during his last talk with Sherrill, so that he hardly had been able to see Sherrill's face, and just after Sherrill had left him, full dark had come. Alan did not know how long he had been sitting in the darkness thinking out these things; but now a little clock which had been ticking steadily in the blackness tinkled six. Alan heard a knock at his door, and when it was repeated, he called, "Come in."

The light which came in from the hall, as the door was opened, showed a man servant. The man, after a respectful inquiry, switched on the light. He crossed into the adjoining room—a bedroom; the room where Alan was, he thought, must be a dressing room, and there was a bath between. Presently the man reappeared, and moved softly about the room, unpacking Alan's suitcase. He hung Alan's other suit in the closet on hangers; he put the linen, except for one shirt, in the dresser drawers, and he put Alan's few toilet things with the ivory-backed brushes and comb and other articles on the dressing stand.

ALAN watched him queerly; no one except himself ever had unpacked Alan's suitcase before; the first time he had gone away to college—it was a brand new suitcase then—"mother" had packed it; after that first time, Alan had packed and unpacked it. It gave him an odd feeling now to see some one else unpacking his things. The man, having finished and taken everything out, continued to look in the suitcase for something else.

"I beg pardon, sir," he said, finally, "but I cannot find your buttons."

"I've got them on," Alan said. He took them out and gave them to the valet with a smile; it was good to have something to smile at, if it was only the realization that he never had thought before of any one's having more than one set of buttons for ordinary shirts. Alan wondered, with a sort of trepidation, whether the man would expect to stay and help him dress; but he only put the buttons in the clean shirt and reopened the dresser drawers and laid out a



change of things.

"Is there anything else, sir?" he asked.

"Nothing, thank you," Alan said.

"I was to tell you, sir, Mr. Sherrill is sorry he cannot be at home to dinner to-night. Mrs. Sherrill and Miss Sherrill will be here. Dinner is at seven, sir."

Alan dressed slowly, after the man had gone; and at one minute before seven he went down-stairs.

There was no one in the lower hall and, after an