

Mrs. Drainger's Veil

By Howard Mumford Jones

From *The Smart Set*

If the house had been merely shabby I doubt whether I would have been interested. Every residence section has its shabby houses, monuments to departed aspirations, falling into slow decay in the midst of weedy yards, sometimes uninhabited and sometimes sheltering one or two members of the family who apparently have been left, like the ancient furniture, to be forgotten. The paint cracks and peels, the windows fall into impossible angles or are boarded up, the porches sag, the chimneys lose a brick or two and come in time to look like stumps of teeth. By and by the whole structure seems to sink into the grass under the burden of its neglect, and only a faint tenacity, a melancholy inertia keeps it from crumbling altogether. Then suddenly the inhabitants die, the neighbors awake to a sudden sense of change, and that is all.

The Drainger house was such a house, but it was more. It was mysterious, uncommunicative. In the midst of the commonplace residence block, with its white cottages, its monotonous lawns and uninteresting gardens, the contrast was startling, secretive, contemptuous. The tall grass waved ironically at the neat grassplots which flanked it. The great untrimmed elms sent branches to beat against the decaying shingles, or downward into the faces of passers-by, with patrician indifference to the law. They had, indeed, the air of ragged retainers, haughty and starving, and yet crowding about the house as if to hide the poverty of their master from the eyes of the vulgar. City ordinances required the laying of cement walks; the rotting boardwalk in front of the Drainger mansion was already treacherous, and no one complained.

The building itself was extraordinary. Built in the days when Crosby had been a lumber town and building material had consequently been cheap, its pretensions were immense. A tall, six-sided tower occupied two-thirds of the front, an elaborate affair, crowned by rusty ironwork in lieu of battlements. Windows were inserted at appropriate intervals, suggesting a donjon keep or a page from Walter Scott. The heavy brown shutters were never opened. There was a grim angularity to the deep porch below, a military cut to the bare front door which added to the forbidding character of the place. Behind this imposing front the rest of the building lay like the parts of a castle, each portion a little lower than the preceding. There were four of these sections, like four platforms, their flat roofs crowned with further rusty ironwork. The windows were infrequent and all barred, and a massive elm to the east of the house threw over them a gloomy and impenetrable shade. Although the whole building had been painted brown, time and the weather had combined to make it almost black, the only patch of color being the rich green of the mossy shingles on the roof of the porch.

I had first noticed the Drainger house because of its oddity. Then I was impressed by its air of speechless and implacable resentment. So far as I could observe it was empty; no foot disturbed the rank grass or troubled the dismal porches. The windows were never thrown open to the sunlight. The front door, in the month I had spent in Crosby, remained locked. I had once observed a grocery wagon standing in front of the house, but this, I assumed, was because the driver wished to leave his horse in the shade.

Proceeding homeward one night to my cousin's, Mark Jedfrey, with whom I was spending the summer, I was startled, when I came in front of the Drainger place, to see a light in the front window of the tower on the ground floor. It was moonlight, and the heavy shadows sculptured the old mansion into fantastic shapes, revealing a barred window inscrutably facing the moon, carving the top of the house into gargoyles of light and throwing the porch into Egyptian darkness. The light through the shutter of the window was therefore as unexpected

as a stab. I paused without knowing it. Apparently I was observed; there was a light sound of footsteps from the invisible porch and the creaking, followed by the shutting, of the front door. Immediately afterwards the light was extinguished.

The person who had been on the porch had moved so quickly and so quietly, and the street, drenched in the July moonlight, seemed so still, that I wondered a moment later whether to credit my senses. At any rate, it was not my business, I concluded, to stand staring at a strange house at one o'clock in the morning, and I resumed my walk home.

A week later, a change in the routine of my daily life made me a regular visitant in the neighborhood. Twice a day I passed the Drainger house. In the morning it seemed to resist the genial sunlight, drawing its hedge of shade trees closer about it and remaining impervious to all suggestions of warmth. And on my return from the office in the evening it was as sealed, as autumnal as ever. The pleasant sounds of human intercourse, the chatting of women on the steps or the whirr of lawn-mowers should, I fancied, at least unshutter a window or burst open a frigid door. But the warm impulses of neighborhood life, like the cries of the boys at their evening game of baseball, broke unheeded against that clifflike impassivity. No one stirred within; no one, not even the paper boy, dared to cut across the front yard; and a pile of yellowing bills on the front steps testified to the unavailing temerity of advertisers.

There was nothing to show I had not dreamed the episode of the light, as I had begun to think of it. I could have made inquiries--Helen, Mark's wife, knows everybody--but I did not. I could have consulted the directory. But I preferred to keep the house to myself. I had a secret sense of proprietorship (I am, I suppose, a romantic and imaginative soul) and I preferred that the mystery should come to me. My alert devotion must, I thought, have its reward. Indeed, my daily walks to and from my work took on the character of a silent duel

between the expressionless walls and my expressionless face, and I was not going to be beaten in taciturnity.

One Friday morning, well into August, I was surprised and curious to see a woman standing under the elms in the front of the Drainger mansion. The neighborhood was, for the moment, deserted. I concealed my eagerness under a mask of impassivity. I thought myself masterly as, pretending an interest in nothing, I yet watched the place out of the tail of my eye. Imagine my increasing surprise to observe that as I approached, the person in question came slowly down to the junction of her walk with the sidewalk, so that, as I drew near we were face to face.

"You are Mr. Gillingham?" she asked.

I stopped mechanically and raised my hat. I visit Crosby regularly, where I am well known, so that I was not surprised to be thus accosted by one who was a stranger to me. She was about forty, obviously a spinster, and clad in a costume not merely out-of-date, but so far out-of-date as to possess a false air of theatricalism. I can best describe her (I am not clever in matters of dress) by saying that, with the exception that she was not wearing a hoopskirt, she appeared to have stepped out of Godey's Lady's Book. A Paisley shawl was wrapped tightly around her head, although the morning was warm, and its subdued brilliance clashed oddly with the faded lemon of her dress. Her face was small, the features regular, but her complexion was more than sallow, it was yellow, the yellow of dying grass and sunless places. A spot of rouge glared on either cheek, and, with her eyes, which were black and brilliant, gave her face the look of fever. Her dark hair, just visible under the shawl, deepened the hectic quality of her features, although, as a matter of fact, she was not ill.

"You are a lawyer?" she continued, her brilliant eyes searching my face, I thought with some boldness, and without waiting for an answer she said, "Come," and walked abruptly toward the house.

I followed her. On the porch we paused; my companion turned and searched the street, which was still empty, a fact which seemed to increase her satisfaction, and without giving me a glance, unlocked the front door with a key which she was carrying.

II

She led me into the house and through two of the rooms into a third before we paused. The transition from sunlight to darkness had been too rapid for my eyes, so that, for some moments I could only stand ridiculously in the middle of the room. I was conscious of the presence of a third person--intensely conscious--and exceedingly uncomfortable. My conductor busied herself pushing forward a chair which, fortunately, she placed under the shuttered window. To this I stumbled.

"You are a lawyer?" asked a voice from the darkness.

I was startled.

The voice sprang from the corner I was facing as though it were a live thing that had seized upon me. It was the voice of a woman, of great age apparently, and yet it possessed a fierce, biting energy that no amount of years could weaken.

"This is Mr. Gillingham," said my conductor with, I thought, a shade of asperity. "Of course he's a lawyer."

To this there succeeded a silence, broken only by the sibilant drawing in of the younger woman's breath.

"I am indeed a lawyer," I said at length. "In what way can I be of service?"

"We see no one," said the imperious voice abruptly. "You must therefore pardon the manner in which I have had you called in."

I was now able to discern something through the gloom.

The speaker sat in extreme shadow. Her dress was a blur in the darkness, faintly outlining her person, which seemed to be of medium height, though in the great chair she looked shrunken and huddled together. Her eyes, faint points of light, were steadfastly fixed on mine, but her face was, I thought, in such deep shadow that I could not make it out.

But the concentration points, so to speak, were not her eyes, but her hands. They lay in her lap motionless, and yet they were extraordinarily alive. Even in that light their emaciated condition testified to her extreme age; but they were not decrepit, they seemed to glow with a steady light, an inward and consuming energy.

"You may leave us, Emily," said the voice, and Emily, who had been hovering with what I somehow felt to be a hint of malice, unwillingly withdrew. The other closed her eyes until the shutting of the door assured us of privacy.

"I am dying," she began suddenly in her strange, impersonal manner.

"Do not interrupt me," she added coldly as I was about to utter some inanity. "I desire to be certain of one thing while there is time, namely, that my wishes respecting the disposition of my body shall be respected--in every particular."

Her manner indicated nothing out of the ordinary. She might have been speaking of the merest commonplace.

"You are a lawyer. How can I so arrange that the directions I will leave must be carried out after my death?"

"Ordinarily," I managed to stammer, "directions in such matters when given to the heirs, have the binding force----"

There was a second's pause.

"That is not what I wish," continued the inflexible voice. "I wish to compel attention to my instructions."

"A provision can be inserted in your will," I said at length, "which would make the inheritance of your property conditional upon the fulfillment of your wishes."

She seemed to consider this. Her hands moved slightly in her lap.

"And if those conditions were not fulfilled?"

"Your estate would go elsewhere as you might direct."

There was prolonged pause. Her eyes disappeared, and try as I would, I could not distinguish her face. Her hands shifted, and she spoke.

"Step to the door and call my daughter. I am Mrs. Drainger."

I might have been the servant. I arose and groped my way toward the door. She neither offered me any direction as to its location, nor commented upon the gloom in which I hesitated.

I reached the door and, opening it, was about to call, when I was aware of Miss Drainger's presence; she seemed to have materialized, a pale specter, out of the dusk, and I was again conscious of vague malice.

"Your mother wished me to call you," I said, holding the door open.

Her strange eyes searched mine for a brief moment as she entered the room.

Suddenly Miss Drainger, poised in the gloom over her mother's chair, seemed to my startled sense like a monstrous pallid moth. The impression, though momentary, was none the less vivid. I felt choked, uncomfortable. An instant only, and Mrs. Drainger's voice recalled me to my senses.

She gave directions for the bringing of a box containing some documents she wished. Miss Drainger said nothing, but turned abruptly, gave me another sidelong glance and left the room.

In the time she was absent neither of us spoke. The strange woman in the corner shrank, it seemed to me, deeper into the dusk, until only her extraordinary hands remained; and I sat in my uncomfortable and ancient chair, the little streaks of sunlight from the blind making odd patterns on my legs and hands.

The return of the daughter with a tin box which she placed in my hands was followed by an extraordinary moment. I became, if I did not deceive myself, increasingly conscious of a silent struggle going on between the two. Mrs. Drainger, in her biting, inflexible voice, again requested her daughter to leave us. Emily demurred and in the interval that followed I had a sense of crisis. Nay, I fancied more; upon hearing Emily's brief protest Mrs. Drainger slowly clenched her hands, and the movement was as though she were steadily bending her daughter's will to her purpose. At length, with the same sibilant in-taking of the breath I had observed before, Emily turned and swept through the door, her face unusually yellow, the little spots of rouge on her cheeks burning suddenly.

The box she had given me contained a will made by Mrs. Drainger, together with a few securities totaling no great value, and other less important documents. This will she now directed me to modify so that

the inheritance of the property upon her death would be conditional upon the fulfillment by the heir of certain conditions which she said she would indicate in writing.

I asked why those conditions could not now be indicated.

"You are all alike," she said bitterly. "All alike in your curiosity. I prefer to put them in writing."

I assured her of the inviolability of her confidence and rose.

"Stay," she commanded. "If that girl asks you any impertinent questions send her to me."

Her hands moved quickly as she spoke. The concentration of her voice alarmed me so that I could think of nothing to say. I bowed and withdrew. It was only when I was once outside the room that I recalled, curiously enough, at no time during my interview had I seen Mrs. Drainger's face.

Miss Emily was not visible. I was about to search for the street door when, in her usual extraordinary manner, she appeared out of the gloom.

"What did she want?" she demanded, almost fiercely, her eyes holding me as though they were hands.

I explained as best I could why I could not tell her.

"Humph!" she ejaculated, and without further speech led me to the door.

"There will be fees, I suppose," she said contemptuously, staring at her hand upon the doorknob. "Do not expect much. You are the only person who has entered this house for a year."

I was embarrassed how to reply.

"Poverty is like contagion. People flee from it," she added with a mirthless laugh, and opened the door.

I bade her farewell. She stared at me, a shrewd look in her black eyes, but said nothing. The instant I was on the porch the door was shut and locked behind me.

III

On my way to Jeffrey's office I could not shake off my unfavorable impression of Miss Drainger. I assured myself again and again that the oddity of their manner of life was sufficient reason for her peculiarities, and yet the same picture of her kept recurring to my mind--a vision of her flitting to and fro in that great house like a monstrous evil moth. I imagined her pale face with its spots of rouge and her lemon dress so unlike any costume I had ever seen. I pictured her materializing, as I phrased it, out of the shadows; hovering expectantly (I knew not why) over the gaunt form in the great chair by the window; or peering out of the unopened shutters as she moved from room to room. I positively grew ashamed of myself for my fancies.

The following morning a square, yellowed envelope (everything about that place seemed to lack freshness), addressed in the fine, regular hand of a generation ago, caught my eye in the heap of mail, and putting aside more important matters, I at once opened it. The note was from Mrs. Drainger, evidently written in her own hand, and contained the provision I was to insert in the will. It was sufficiently queer. She desired that upon her death no one should venture to see her face, which would be covered, she wrote, by a thick veil, and she was particularly anxious that her daughter Emily should respect her wishes. Otherwise her property was to go elsewhere.

The energy and clarity exhibited by the old lady on the previous day forbade any notion that this preposterous idea sprang from a mind touched by the infirmities of age, and yet her stipulation was so peculiar, so irrational that I pondered long over my duty in the case. What Mrs. Drainger wanted was, in one sense, absurdly simple--merely the revision of her will, scarcely more than the retyping of that simple document; but I was conscious of a deeper demand; as though, to the support of her desires, she had called in my person upon the assurance, even the majesty of the law. I could not justify her breaking of what I instinctively took to be a determined habit of seclusion except by postulating deeper issues than I saw on the surface. There was no reason why I should not revise the document and be done with it; queerer provisions have been made in other wills. Yet, to make the inheritance conditional upon so strange a request might be unfair to Miss Drainger. It was true, I distrusted her; but that was not to the point, and this provision was one that she would have every natural incentive to break.

A further thought occurred--there might be other children not known to me who would expect some share in the modest estate; finding the property willed to Emily upon so tenuous a provision, they might easily charge that that provision had been broken, when proof and disproof would be equally difficult, and Mrs. Drainger's wish that her companion (despite her singular testament) be her sole heir would then not be met. The will simply provided that, should Emily forfeit her right to the property the estate should go to a local charity; no mention was made of other children; but this silence did not disprove their existence.

I was too well aware of the ease with which so singular a document could be attacked in court, not to be uneasy. I resolved finally again to consult my client (if the name could attach to so imperious a lady) and briefly announcing my absence to Mark Jedfrey, I sought the Drainger residence.

The old house looked as deathlike as ever. It seemed incredible that human existence could be possible within its sunless walls. Indeed, my persistent efforts at the rusty bell-handle produced only a feeble echo, and the round-eyed interest of a group of urchins, who volunteered, after a time, that nobody lived there. I was beginning to agree with them when a key was turned in the lock and the weatherbeaten door yielded a few cautious inches. Miss Emily looked out at me.

"It's you," she said ungraciously, and seemed rather to hope that I would disappear as at the uttering of a charm.

"I wish to see your mother," I said.

She hesitated. At length, opening the door scarcely enough to admit me, she bade me enter, and disappeared. The house was as dismal as ever.

"Come in here," she said, appearing after her usual sudden fashion in a dim doorway and looking more like a wraith than ever.

Her eyes burned me as I walked cautiously into the other room.

It was one I had not seen, but Mrs. Drainger was seated, as before, in the obscurest corner, a blur of white in which her pale hands looked like pallid lumps of flame. I faced my invisible client.

"I have come about the will," I began, and was immediately conscious of Miss Emily's voracious interest. The opening was, as I recognized too late, scarcely diplomatic.

"Will?" said the daughter in a harsh voice. "You are making a will? You--you----"

She looked enormously tall and unpleasant as she spoke.

"Yes, my dear," responded Mrs. Drainger dryly.

"You? You?" continued the daughter rapidly. "After all these years? It is incredible. It is incredible." She laughed unpleasantly with closed eyes.

Then, conscious that she was betraying emotions not meant for me, she turned to my chair. "You will understand that the information is something of a shock for a daughter. My mother's condition----"

"Mrs. Drainger," I ventured to interrupt, "wishes merely to make certain changes in an instrument already drawn up." I was conscious of a stir, whether of gratitude or of resentment, from the darkened corner.

Emily seemed momentarily bewildered.

"You frightened me," she said at length with a frankness palpably false.

"I quite understand," I retorted, the sham being, I thought, tolerably obvious. "And now if your mother and I----"

She took the hint.

"I will leave you," she said.

It was evident I had not won her gratitude.

As the door closed behind her I heard a low sound from Mrs. Drainger.

"I am afraid--afraid," she murmured weakly. I think forgetting my presence; and then, as if suddenly conscious of a slip:

"Old women, Mr. Gillingham, have their fancies. Death seems at times uncomfortably close."

I murmured some polite deprecation, but I was sure it was not death that frightened her.

Drawing from my pocket her letter and the copy of the will I had prepared I explained as best I could why I had come. I was tolerably confused. I could not question her entire sanity, and as I did not wish in any way to hint at what I felt concerning Emily I soon involved myself in a veritable dust of legal pedantry. Finally I asked whether there were other children.

Mrs. Drainger heard me out in ironic silence.

"I have no others," she admitted at length, and added after a second, "Thank heaven!"

"There remains only one other matter," I said. "The provisions of your will are such that unless she knows them in advance Miss Emily will almost inevitably forfeit the inheritance."

"I am aware of that," said the voice, and the pale hands moved imperceptibly. "I am quite well aware of what I am doing, Mr. Gillingham, and I repeat, my daughter is not to ask impertinent questions."

I bowed, somewhat ruffled. I added that it would be necessary to witness her signature in the usual manner. She seemed surprised to learn that two persons were necessary, and remained silent.

"Call Emily," she directed.

"Emily will not do," I objected, "since she is a possible beneficiary."

"I am aware," she responded coldly. "Call Emily."

Emily, being summoned, was directed to procure the presence of a Mrs. Mueller, living near by, who occasionally helped with the work. She seemed unusually tractable and departed on her errand without comment.

For some three or four minutes Mrs. Drainger did not speak. I could not, of course, see her face; but once or twice her hands shifted in her lap, and I thought she was perturbed. My own conversational efforts had been so uniformly unfortunate that I concluded to remain silent.

"You will see an old, worn woman," she said musingly. "But it does not matter."

The entrance of Miss Emily followed by that of a stout, comfortable German woman prevented the necessity of a reply. I explained what was wanted; Emily assisted me in making it clear to Mrs. Mueller, and then withdrew to the door, where she assumed an attitude of disinterestedness--too obviously assumed it, I thought.

It became necessary to have more light, and Emily went to the window and opened the shutter. I turned to where Mrs. Drainger sat, the will in my left hand, my fountain pen in the other, and in that attitude I hesitated for a brief moment of incredulity. I thought I was looking at a woman without a head.

A second's glance showed how mistaken I was. The thin, emaciated figure, clad like her daughter's, in a fashion long forgotten, was, as I had surmised, somewhat shrunken by age. Her strange hands, loosely held in her lap, were wrinkled with a thousand wrinkles like crumpled parchment, and yet, even in that crueler light, they conveyed the

impression of power. They seemed like antennæ wherewith their owner touched and tested the outer world. As I sought the reason for this impression I saw that the face and head were entirely wrapped in the thick folds of a black veil, which was so arranged that the eyes alone were visible. These seemed to swim up faintly as from the bottom of a well.

My imperceptible pause of surprise drew from Emily that sudden in-taking of breath I have before remarked, and I could not but feel that she intended, as I felt, a subtle sarcasm in the sound. Accordingly I made no comment, secured Mrs. Drainger's signature without difficulty, then that of Mrs. Mueller (who, during the whole procedure, uttered no word), and added my own with as natural an air as I could manage. Miss Emily led Mrs. Mueller away and I offered the completed document to Mrs. Drainger.

"Keep it," she said with some feebleness and then, more loudly,

"I will take care. Keep it. Make her call for it when it is time. Now let her come to me."

My search for the daughter necessitated my going through the several rooms, so that I had a tolerable notion of the house. Miss Emily's inheritance would not be great, although the lot was itself valuable. The furniture was all old and of just that antiquity which lacks value without acquiring charm. I remarked a vast what-not in one corner; one table promised well, and there were one or two really fine engravings; but for the most part the upholstered chairs were shabby, the tables and desks old and cracked, and the carpets of a faded elegance. The kitchen into which I passed was notably bleak, and the decrepit wood-stove seemed never to have held a fire.

Miss Drainger came in the back entrance as I entered the kitchen. Her face was paler than I had ever seen it. She confronted me silently.

"If you are through," she said bitinglly, "I will let you out the front door."

I observed mildly that her mother wanted her and accompanied her into the sitting room. I hesitated how best to broach the matter I had in mind without giving offense and resolved, unfortunately, on a deliberate lie.

"My fee has been paid," I said, awkwardly enough.

She searched my face. I affected to be busy with my hat.

"I see," she commented with a short, cynical laugh. "Sometimes it is done that way, sometimes in ways less pleasant. We are quite used to it. I suppose I had better thank you."

I felt my face flush scarlet.

"It is not necessary," I faltered and was grateful to get out of the house without further blunders.

I filled my lungs with the sweet August morning in positive relief, feeling that I had been in the land of the dead.

IV

I had no further contact with the Draingers for some days. Indeed, the whole curious episode was beginning to fade in my mind when, some three weeks later, a dinner that Helen was giving recalled my experience and added fresh interest to my relations with them. I sat next to one of those conventionally pretty women who require only the surface of one's attention, and I was preparing to be bored for the rest of the evening when I caught a chance remark of Isobel Allyn's.

Mrs. Allyn (everybody calls her Isobel) was talking across the table to Dr. Fawcett.

"You've lost your mysterious veiled lady," she said.

"Yes," said Fawcett.

Fawcett is a good fellow, about forty-five, and inclined to be reticent.

"Veiled lady?" shrilled some feminine nonentity, much to Fawcett's distaste. "How thrilling! Do tell us about it!"

"There is nothing to tell," growled Fawcett.

Isobel, however, is not easily swept aside.

"Oh, yes, there is," she persisted. "Dr. Fawcett has for years had a mysterious patient whose face, whenever he visits her, remains obstinately invisible. Now, without revealing her features, the lady has had the bad taste to die."

I leaned forward.

"Is it Mrs. Drainger, Fawcett?"

He turned to me with mingled relief and inquiry.

"Yes. How did you know?"

I promised myself something later and remained vague.

"I had heard of her," I said.

His eyes questioned mine.

"Everyone must have heard of her but me," came the same irritating voice. "Aren't you going to tell us?"

"Merely a patient of mine," said Fawcett impolitely. "She has just died--at an advanced age."

It was cruel, but justified.

Isobel was penitent.

"I am sorry," she said prettily, and Helen hastily introduced the subject of automobiles, concerning which she knows very little.

I sought out Fawcett on the porch after dinner.

"About Mrs. Drainger," he said. "How did you know?"

"I am, I suppose, her lawyer--or was, rather," I explained. "I have her will."

"I thought soulless corporations and bloated bondholders were more your line."

"They are," I said, and briefly recounted how I had come to be Mrs. Drainger's attorney.

Fawcett's cigar glowed in the dark. His wicker chair creaked as he shifted his weight.

"The daughter is a curious creature," he observed slowly, "something uncanny about her, even devilish. Somehow I picture her striding up and down the shabby rooms like a lioness. The town has grown, the neighborhood changed, and I don't believe either of them was aware of it. They lived absolutely in the past. So far as I could see they hated each other--not, you understand with any petty, feminine spite, but

splendidly, like elemental beings. I never went into the house without feeling that hot, suppressed atmosphere of hate. And yet there they were, tied together, as absolutely alone as though they had been left on a deserted island.

"Tied together--I fancy that's it. Emily could, of course, have gone away. And yet I have a queer fancy, too, that so long as Mrs. Drainger wore her veil the girl could not leave; that if she had once uncovered her face the tie between them would have been broken. The old lady knew that, certainly, and I think Emily knew it, too, and I fancy she must have tried again and again to lift the covering from her mother's face. But Mrs. Drainger--she was will incarnate--was always just too much for her."

I told him about the provisions of her will.

"Ah," he said, "it is even clearer now. My theory is right. The veil was, as it were, the symbol that held them together. But now, I wonder, does the will represent the old lady's revenge, or her forgiveness?"

"We shall know shortly," I interjected.

Fawcett nodded in the dark.

"Captain Drainger built the house," he continued inconsequentially, "back in the forties for himself and his young bride, and, though it looks bleak enough now, it was for the Crosby of those days a mansion of the first class. The captain, the tradition is, was a wild, obstinate fellow with black hair and brilliant eyes (I fancy Emily has much of her father in her), and nobody was greatly surprised, when the war broke out, to have him at first lukewarm, and then avowedly a Confederate. Of course he might as well have professed atheism or free love in this locality--he might better have blown his brains out--which he practically did, anyway. Public sentiment forced him out of

the state and over Mason and Dixon's line, and he entered the rebel army as a cavalry captain, and deliberately (we heard) got himself killed. Of course the Drainger fortune, fair enough for those days, went to pieces at once.

"Mrs. Drainger immediately adopted the policy of complete seclusion she was to follow ever after. When the captain left, it was said they would not speak; at any rate, she broke off her friendships, refused herself to callers, and saw nobody. Her condition served her as an excuse, but everybody knew, I guess, the real reason why she kept to herself. There, alone with an old servant who died a year or so later, she walked the floor of that mockery of a house, or sat brooding over the coming of the child. It must have been pleasant! Emily was born just before we heard of the captain's death.

"One or two of her nearest friends tried to comfort her, but she would see no one except the doctor--who, by the way was my father. I have inherited the Draingers, you see."

Fawcett's cigar was out, but he did not light another.

"My mother, from whom I got all this, said there was something magnificent in the way Mrs. Drainger suffered, in the way she resented any intrusion upon her self-imposed solitude. My mother was a courageous woman, but she said she was positively frightened when Mrs. Drainger, a tall, fair woman with straight, level eyes, came to the door in answer to her knock.

"'You may go back, Lucy Fawcett,' she said. 'A rebel has no friends,' and shut the door in my mother's mortified face.

"At first there was some grumbling and ill-natured talk, but it soon ceased. People who knew her family (she was a Merion) saw pretty clearly that Mrs. Drainger's heart had, for most purposes, stopped beating when the captain found the bullet he was looking for, and

tumbled from his horse. What was left was the magnificent shell of a woman in that great shell of a house--that, and the child. I can picture her sitting upright in some great chair by the shuttered window, peering out at the rank grass and the elm trees, or else wandering, always majestic, from room to room with her baby in her arms, listening to the silence. She cut herself off from the world of the living as though she had been buried, and she tried to bring up Emily as though they were in the land of the dead.

"Emily was, of course, her only friend, her only companion, her only link with life. Tragically enough, she was to fail her. She grew up, a solitary, imperious child, I imagine much as she is now. She strikes me as being one of those unfortunate natures who are as old at twelve as they ever will be. Mother hinted at terrible scenes between the woman, like a tragedy queen, and her baby, the child stormily demanding to be like other children, the mother stonily listening and never bending her ways. The will of the mother--I grow fanciful--was like ice-cold metal, the child was hot with life, and the result was passionate rebellions, followed by long weeks of sullen silence. And always Mrs. Drainger hugged her isolation and hugged her child to that isolation because she was her father's daughter. How or on what they lived, nobody knows.

"You understand," Fawcett interposed, "that this is mainly conjecture. They were long before my day then. I am merely putting together what I heard and my own inferences from what I have seen. And it seems to me, looking back, that Mrs. Drainger set, as it were, when the captain died, into that terrible fixed mold she was to wear ever after, and the lonely child with the brilliant black eyes was not merely fighting solitude, she was beating her passionate little fists against the granite of her mother's nature. And I fancy that at an early age (she was very mature, mind), Emily came to hate her mother quite earnestly and conscientiously, and, so to speak, without meanness or malice.

"Of course it was impossible to keep the girl totally confined. She did not, it is true, go to school, but she went out more or less, and in a queer, unnatural way she made friends. That was later, however. She never went to parties, since her mother would not give any and she was proud--all the Draingers are proud. And she had no playmates. Until she was a young woman, so far as human intercourse was concerned, Emily might as well have had the plague in the house.

"But she went out as she grew older. For instance, she went to church, not, I fancy, because she had any need of religion, but because it was a place she could go without embarrassment or comment."

There was a moment of silence as though Fawcett was pondering how to continue, and I heard the blur of voices from the hall and prayed that nobody would come.

"We lived across the street from them in those days," he resumed, "and I was a young cub from the medical school, home only at vacations. I really don't know all that happened. Indeed, it seems to me that I have known the Draingers only by flashes at any time. They were always wrapped in mysterious human differences, and even when you saw her on the street some of that surcharged atmosphere of silence seemed to color Emily's face. She had grown up then. Her clothes were quite orthodox, and she was handsome as a leopard is handsome, but always she struck me as haunted by a vague fear, a fear of the house, perhaps, and of her mother's power to rule her. I used to fancy, watching her return to their sombre dwelling, that she was drawn back as to a spider's web by the fascination of its tragic silences. The story of her life is like a strange book read by lightning, with many leaves turned over unseen between the flashes."

"You were in love with her!" I cried.

"No," he said slowly. "I might have been, but I wasn't. You are right, though, in guessing there was love in her story, only it was not I, it was Charlie Brede who, so to speak, sprang the trap.

"She got to know him at church. Charles was an honest, ordinary, likable boy with a face like a Greek god and a streak of the most unaccountable perversity. His obstinacy was at once intense and wild. That made him interesting and, though there was no greatness behind it, any woman would have loved his face. Don't imagine, furthermore, because I have supposed they met at church, that he was narrowly pious. Everybody went to church in those days--there was nowhere else to go. Charlie was, in short, an ordinary, well-behaved youngster, except that his face hinted at possibilities he couldn't have fulfilled, and except for his dash of narrow rebellion. I don't see how, to such a stormy creature as Emily, he could have been bearable.

"The affair had got well along when I came home in the spring. At first, I gathered from the talk, Emily had met him only away from the house (it was not home), at church or downtown, or in such ways as she could unsuspectingly contrive. Then somehow Charlie suspected something queer and insisted, in one of his obstinate fits, on his duty to call.

"I know this because they stood for a long time under the trees in front of our house, Charles's voice booming up through the scented darkness as he argued. Emily put him off with various feminine subterfuges--she was, I remember, rather magnificent in her despairing diplomacy--and I thought for a while she would succeed. Then I heard Brede's voice, wrathful and sullen, with a quality of finality.

"'If you are ashamed of me----' he said, and walked off.

"It was the one statement she could not outwit. Emily stood for a moment, then--I can imagine with what terrific surrender of pride--ran after him.

"Charlie, Charlie!" she called. He stopped. She came up to him. There was a low murmur of voices, and I thought she was crying.

"Tuesday, then," he said, and kissed her.

"Emily waited until he was well away, and in the moonlight I could see her raise her hands to her head in a gesture that might have been despair, that might have been puzzlement. Then she crossed the street into the blackness of their porch.

"Did she love him? I don't know. Do you?"

The question hung motionless in the air. Fawcett lit another cigar.

"One would have expected something regal about the man Emily Drainger should choose. You agree with me, I suspect, that she is--or was--leonine, terrific. Perhaps she was deceived by his face. Perhaps, after the manner of lovers, she found splendid lights and vistas in the Charlie Brede the rest of us considered rather ordinary. Or perhaps, since she had lived her solitary life so long, pestered and haunted by her mother, any pair of lips would have awakened in her the same powerful and primitive impulses. He was her man, and she wanted him, and she was not to get him. I have even thought that she did not love him at all: that she was quite willing to feign a passion in order to escape from that terrible mother with her eyes forever focused on her tragedy, her mother, and that gaunt, grim house. I am superstitious about that house. Nothing good can come out of it. It warped Mrs. Drainger out of all semblance to human nature, and it was warping Emily, and Mrs. Drainger was somehow the presiding genius, the central heart of that sinister fascination.

"Charlie called that Tuesday night, I know, because I stayed home to see. I was quite unashamed in doing so. He had, I must say, courage. But he did not see Emily. There were two chairs on the porch, and, to the enormous surprise of the neighborhood, which had not seen Mrs. Drainger for years, she occupied one of those chairs and Charlie the other, and, after a fashion, they conversed. I could not hear what they said, but there was in Mrs. Drainger's calm, in her placid acceptance of the situation, a quality of danger. I had an impulse to cry out. She made me think of a steel instrument ready to close. And, as Charlie had an obstinate streak in him, it became fairly evident that we were witnessing a duel--a duel for the possession of Emily Drainger. Mute obstinacy was pitted against will, and Emily, enchained and chafing, was permitted only to stand by.

"Considered from Mrs. Drainger's point of view, she was not, I suppose, so hideously unfair. One doesn't shut off the last ray of light from the prisoner's dungeon or grudge clothing to a naked man. And her daughter was, as I have intimated, her only link with the living. Hers was the selfishness of narrow hunger, if you will, of an almost literal nakedness. And yet one cannot live alone with the dead for twenty years and remain sane. Since Mrs. Drainger's life was to Mrs. Drainger entirely normal, she could not, in the nature of the case, imagine what she was condemning Emily to. The mother thought of Brede, I fancy, as of some spiritual calamity that would rob her of half her soul, and she brought to the issue her one power--her power of breaking people's wills, and fought him as fiercely as she would have fought the devil.

"Charlie called again Friday and had again the pleasure of Mrs. Drainger's society. He called again next week; this time both Emily and Mrs. Drainger entertained him. The result was, I imagine, even more unsatisfactory--what Mrs. Drainger wanted. If it had not been so terrific, it would have been funny. Some of us, indeed, took to making wagers on the contest. He called repeatedly. Whether he saw Emily or not, there was always Mrs. Drainger.

"It is not her mere presence, mind, that was disconcerting. The old lady was somehow sinister in her silent intensity, in her subtle power of infiltration. Emily seemed, so far as I could see, thoroughly cowed. Strain as she would at her leash, the keeper held her, and the tedious pattern of their struggling conversation concealed bright chains. This, Mrs. Drainger seemed to say, is what you are coming to. And Charlie would look appealingly at Emily, and she at him, and they both looked at the imperturbable monster of a woman, and on Charlie's lips the desperate proposals to go somewhere, to do something, to get out of it, died before he could utter them. Only mute obstinacy held him there. Mrs. Drainger, if she could not prevent his coming, could at least hold Emily dumb.

"It lasted some four weeks. At length--what was bound to happen--the weakest snapped. A week went by, and Charlie did not come. Emily haunted the porch in an ironic appearance of freedom. Mrs. Drainger, in some subtle way, knew that she had won, that the girl was eternally hers. Emily's face was pitifully white: she was suffering. Was it love? Or was it her passionate hatred of the prison that held her, the guardian that kept her helpless?

"Then, one evening, Charlie came up the street. He looked unwell, as though the contest of wills had somehow broken him. He walked straight to the porch where Emily sat. She rose to meet him--I think she was trembling.

"'Good-bye,' he said, and held out his hand.

"Apparently she did not ask why he had failed her, or where he was going, or how he came so abruptly to bid her farewell. She took his hand for a moment, and, with the other, steadied herself against the chair, and so they stood looking at each other. There must have been queer lights in their eyes--desire baffled in some strange way, wounded pride, and an eating, mortal sickness. Charlie's hand

dropped, he ran down the walk, crossed the street straight toward me so that I saw his white face, and walked away. We never saw him again. Emily stood watching him, perhaps hoping that he would look back. If he did there was still a possibility. But he did not, and she heard, I suppose, the iron gates clang to. She went abruptly into the house. An hour later I saw her go out, and after an interval, return."

V

The story lay between us like a damp mist.

Fawcett seemed to have forgotten me, but my silence clung to him with mute tenacity.

"What I should know," his voice rumbled on, "I don't know--that is, of course, the scene between the two afterwards. When Emily Drainger returned to her house that night something awful happened. What it was, she alone now knows. But the next flash I had of their history came three or four years later--when I had taken up my father's practice after his death. I have said the Draingers were an inheritance; he had been called in to see Mrs. Drainger several times and on those times had seen what I saw later, but I had been away. I could not question him and he was, above everything, scrupulously exact in keeping the confidences of his patients--even with me. At any rate, I was called in to see Mrs. Drainger as my father's son. I saw for the first time that her face was entirely shrouded in the thick black veil she wore ever after; and the wearing of that veil dates, I think, from the night that Charlie Brede and Emily Drainger looked with baffled wonder into each other's eyes.

"Imagine living with the thing. Imagine the torture of patience, the fixity of will required to keep it eternally on. Do you know how bandages feel after a time? Think of shrouding your head for twenty years. But think also of the slow stealthiness with which the mute reproach of that shrouded face would creep into your nerves if you

had to live with it; think of the imaginative persistency which saw, in this covering of the features, not merely just the tie that would hold Emily to her forever, but the tedious process of revenge for an injury not known to us, for some monstrous moment between the two that only the dull walls of the house could hear.

"Think, too, of the ingenuity of that symbol. Its very helplessness forbade to Emily the exultation of revilement. Good Heavens! It is bad enough to be tied by your own weakness to a face that you hate, but to be chained forever to that thing, to rise up with it and lie down with it, to talk to it, to insult it, to listen to it, and yet never see your sarcasms strike home! Think of hating a black veil for twenty years!

"Emily, of course, had changed. She met me at the door as she met you. She was a shell burned out by one fierce moment of fire. Something had toppled in her and collapsed, and only by the pitiless and continual irony of her silence could she hide her inward loathing. With me she was proud and acid, but in her mother's room, whither she led me, her silence was like a frightened, defensive covering which might, at any moment, be stripped from her, leaving her indecently, almost physically bare. Her pride, in sum, was broken, but not her hatred. That smoldered where before it had flamed.

"Mrs. Drainger had some minor complaint, I have forgotten what. Emily followed me into the room where she sat--she seems to me always to have been sitting with patient intensity in some corner of that house. I recall the stab of surprise with which I searched the shadowy room for the austere and beautiful face of the Mrs. Drainger we knew, and how, in my confusion, I could see nothing but her hands. Emily mocked me with her eyes, but did not speak. Then I saw.

"I remember I asked Mrs. Drainger, for some reason, to remove the veil. I was raw in those days. Emily stiffened behind me and, I thought, started to speak, but the rigid silence of Mrs. Drainger was

never broken. Her very speechlessness rebuked me. I prescribed for her and got out of the house.

"If you will believe me, Gillingham," Fawcett went on with a change of voice, "I have visited that house for twenty years and during that time Mrs. Drainger, so far as I know, has never divested herself of her veil. I got that much out of Emily. But I could get no more. She seemed to freeze when I sought after reasons. I do not know what she had done, but I do know that the wearing of that black mantle represented to them that flaming crisis in their relationship when Emily lost forever her one hope of escape.

"I have watched them for twenty years. Twenty years--think of it! They were like two granite rocks, clashed once together, and thereafter frozen into immobility. They have never changed. All pretense of affection had dropped from them--even before me. There was only naked hate. Year after weary year, seeing no one, never going anywhere, they have rasped and worn each other merely by being what they are.

"And now the ultimate ingenuity, the last refinement of unhappiness! The veil, I say, is a symbol of their shuddering cohesion which death would normally destroy. But the will of this woman, as it triumphed over life, she has made to triumph over death: if Emily removes the veil she becomes, with her lack of training, her useless equipment, a helpless beggar; if she does not remove it, if she never sees her mother's face, she will be tormented by memory, bound forever, as she was in life, to a blank and inscrutable shawl. Is it forgiveness--or justice, mercy or revenge?"

Fawcett broke off as a swirl of guests flooded the coolness of the porch.

"I will tell you what happens," I said when I could.

"Do," he returned. "And you must take precautions."

VI

On my way to the office next morning, it suddenly dawned on me what Fawcett meant. How, in truth, was I to ascertain whether the singular provision of Mrs. Drainger's will had or had not been met? Fawcett had not, he said, been present at the death; and even if he had been, there must elapse a considerable time in which Emily would necessarily be alone with her mother's body.

The more I pondered, the more puzzled I grew. It seemed grotesque that Mrs. Drainger should have overlooked this situation. Moreover, I was naturally curious. Fawcett's narrative justified me in all I had thought, but it had not given a motive for the veil, nor for the tenacity with which Mrs. Drainger clung to it.

The house looked unchanged as I turned into the street on which it faced. Death was, it said, of so little consequence to the walls which had immured and conquered life itself. There was in the very lack of change a great irony. A barren device of crêpe on the door, one lower window partly open--that was all. The very papers yellowing before the door had not been swept away.

Mrs. Mueller, the woman who had witnessed the signing of the will, was standing on the steps that led to the street. If my relations with the Draingers had been odd, they were to conclude as strangely. The woman was apparently expecting me, and her manner testified to recent terror.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"She told me," Mrs. Mueller said, "to get you."

Her hunted look and the solemn glance she gave me testified that she was as real to her as though Mrs. Drainger had not for twenty-four hours been dead. "She told me if a certain thing happened I was to call you."

Suddenly I saw. That tremendous woman was reaching at me over the very boundaries of life.

"I don't like it," continued Mrs. Mueller with an indescribable accent of fear and a sidelong look at me for support. "I don't like it. But she said the day before she died, she said, 'If Miss Emily uncovers my face when I am dead, you are to tell Mr. Gillingham,' she said. And she made me promise to watch."

She seemed to want to tell me something she could not put in words.

"It is terrible," she went on in a vague, haunted manner, "what I saw."

"What?"

"She was always a queer woman. 'If Miss Emily uncovers my face,' she said, 'you are to call Mr. Gillingham.' And she made me watch. I didn't want to. So when she died I came right over."

"How did you know when to come?"

"I don't know," she answered helplessly. "I just came. She told me Miss Emily wasn't to see me, but I was to watch. It is terrible."

We were at the door. I had a sudden distaste for the woman, though she was quite simply honest, and, as it were, the helpless and unconscious spy that Mrs. Drainger, in her grave, had set upon her daughter. I was anxious to get it over with.

"You will see," she said again and brought me into the house.

Her terror was beginning to affect me. She was quite unable to tell me what she had seen, but her whole manner expressed a dazed horror, not so much of some concrete fear as of the ghastly position in which she found herself.

She led me to the door of the room in which I had last seen Mrs. Drainger alive, but no inducement could make her come in, nor could I get from her anything more explicit. Poor soul! I do not wonder at her terror.

The room was as before. The shuttered windows admitted only faint bars and pencils of light. The dim chairs and shadowy tables were discernible, but, as if they yielded precedence to death, the most solid object in the obscurity was the coffin in which Mrs. Drainger's body lay. I advanced to it. The mistress of this ill-fated mansion seemed to have grown larger in death; her body was no longer shrunken and her folded hands still retained faintly their peculiar luminous quality. I could see in the shadow that around her face there was no longer the black mantle, but the face puzzled me--I could not make it out, and, opening the shutter, I let in the light.

I stepped again to the side of the coffin. Could this be the queenly beauty of whom Fawcett had spoken? For, where the features should have been there was, naked to the light, only a shapeless, contorted mass of flesh in which, the twisted eyelids being closed, there seemed to my horrified gaze no decent trace of human resemblance!

I turned half-sick from the sight. Emily Drainger, tall, pallid yellow, her great eyes burning with an evil glow, her lemon dress an unhealthy splotch in the doorway, stood regarding me.

"The will--the will!" she cried. "She thought she could stop me, but she could not!"

"Who--what has done this?" I pointed involuntarily to her mother's face.

She seemed to expand before my eyes with evil triumph.

"I--I," she cried at length, her black eyes holding me as I stood, weak and faint, clinging unconsciously to the coffin for support. "Twenty years ago! But"--she laughed hysterically and came to look at the shapeless, brutalized face--"I never knew, until she died, that it was done so well!!"