

The Abigail Sheriff Memorial

By Vincent O'Sullivan

Lyddy, the mulatto girl at Mrs. Wassman's room-house, opened my door noisily.

"Say, are you awake?"

"No."

"Well, here's some mail for you."

"All right, put it there," I mumbled with my head under the bedclothes. "What time is it?"

"'Bout half-past three. The sun's been shinin' jest lovely all day. Listen, why don't you go out in the sun once and a while? 'Pears to me that's what you kind of need 'stead of layin' there in bed an' stayin' out all night. Mrs. Wassman's gettin' real mad. Yes, sir."

"Tell her I was in as early as four o'clock this morning. That will console her."

The mulatto gave a good-humoured laugh. I heard her singing and banging with a brush outside on the stairs. I was furious at being waked up when I might have had two or three hours more of unconsciousness. With my eyes closed, I tried to think of nothing. But it was no use. The awakening, the most hideous hour of the twenty-four, had to be faced.

I pulled over the chair on which my clothes had been thrown and went through the pockets. Four cents, a subway ticket, a half-empty packet of cigarettes, and a small "taken-while-you-wait" photograph of a girl. Where had I got that? Oh, yes; it was that girl who said she was a model. Her shoulders had been painted by—who did she say had painted her shoulders? She had been on the covers of two magazines. I tore up the photograph and threw the pieces on the floor, and then looked for the letter which the mulatto had brought in. Whom could it be from? I hardly ever got letters nowadays.

I glanced at the envelope, but when I saw the business address of Abner, the picture-dealer, in the corner I flung it away in disgust and lay down again and pulled the bedclothes over my head. It was, of course, another request from Abner to give him some work that would cover the advance he had made six months ago.

"What a rotten life!" I thought.

Soon it would be a year since I had touched a brush or a drawing-pencil. I had had the beginnings of a sort of renown among certain groups; a few articles even had been written about me in little hole-and-corner magazines; but now there was nothing I was more sick of than art and the chatter of art. Art? I hardly gave a thought to it. I would gladly have put my boot through any picture ever painted if the act would have brought me enough for one really big trial of fortune. I had the conviction that the reason my luck had been so invariably bad of late was that the stakes I was obliged to play were too paltry and also too vital. When you are staking your food and shelter, you are so nervous that your judgment is no longer trustworthy. That is how it had been with me for seven or eight months.

One glorious night I won twenty times as much as I ever got for a picture. But of late the sums I had to put up were so small that I used sometimes go in terror lest they would refuse me at the door. One night they did refuse me; they said I was a broken-down bum. I walked along a street of private houses wondering what I could do. I was suffering the torments of the damned. I would have taken my vest and shirt off and pawned them, but it was too late to pawn. I would have gone to Abner, gone down on my knees to him, entered into any contract he liked, but it was too late for him, too. What was I to do? It was a hard, cold night, but although I was thinly

clad, and had not eaten anything to speak of for the last two days, I scarcely felt the cold. I must have had fever, for I was shaking and burning all over. I felt sure that if I could get back there, just once for only five minutes, the luck would come flowing my way. I could not go back to where I lived. I thought with horror of the bare room and the flaring gas-jet. "I'll go in the river," I thought, "sooner than go back to my bedroom tonight."

Just ahead of me, a motor car stopped. A footman jumped off and opened the door, and a lady stepped out. It was no decision of mine; I had no time for decision; I was driven by instinct to go up to her.

"You couldn't help a poor fellow this cold night?"

"Here, you get out!" shouted the footman. "Beat it, you dirty beggar!"

But the lady turned, and seeing a shabby-looking man without an overcoat, being hustled by her fur-clad servant, she may have thought that things were not altogether as they ought to be. Anyhow, she paused as she was entering the house.

"I'm so sorry for you," she said to me. "Please take this;" and she handed me a bill.

It was as well she did. If she had refused, I might have plucked her rich cloak off her back and made a run for it. I tell you, I was desperate.

"Madam's too good to the like of you," said the footman. "If you don't clear off I'll call a policeman."

I turned into the avenue, and by the advantage of a street lamp I looked at the note in my hand. It was probably a dollar, but it might be two. It was ten! Whether it had been given by good-will or in mistake; there it was. And it brought luck that night; I did well.

With the proceeds I furbished myself up somewhat. Heaven knows I hesitated about doing this; but it was necessary. If I presented a fairly decent appearance where I went to play, they would not be so ready to insult me and throw me out. That was the only reason I bought clothes, for I had gradually cut adrift from all acquaintances; and as for the art-world that lives in expensive studios, and gives receptions, and wears dress-clothes, and looks after its health, I had nothing to do with it. It was always a question with me when I had a dollar whether it would be safe to go without food or not. Once I had a kind of fit in that place where we played, and they made things very unpleasant for me. They were afraid I might die in the house, and then the police would come in. So to prevent a recurrence of the fainting-fit I began to eat more regularly.

Sometimes I would take what might be called a good dinner, two or three dishes. Then I would give myself some advice and go immediately back to my room, resolved to stay in all night. But if you have only one room, the worst hours to be in it, I think, are the early hours of the night. For if you have only a cheap room to depend on for shelter, and hold that precariously, you have surely had horrible thoughts in it at one time or another; and they are all over the wall. If you find yourself in your room at nine or ten o'clock in the evening, a time when you might have a respite, these haggard thoughts come down from the wall and crowd round you, and the anguish is such that only the most heroic spirits can bear it. I never could. The voices in the streets, the lights and noise, called me out of that place of torment. In the streets you have the illusion of sharing the torment with others.

It all seems strange to me when I look back on that time now—now that life has become so grey and indifferent. I ask myself, could that really have been me? I hardly existed till five or six at night. It all depended on the awakening. If I regained consciousness upon the pleasant thought that I had recovered a good sum from the night before, I might go out, even if the sun were shining; stroll in the park; buy myself a decent meal. In the opposite case, I would lie there supinely, prolonging a comatose state as much as I could, so as not to face the blank merciless

day with all the shifts and expedients and scrawpings and humiliations. As for work—drawing and painting—are you laughing at me? I tried it once or twice, to do what is called commercial work—pictures for advertisements. Even with that kind of thing I could make no headway. I stared at the paper for an hour at a time, but I was developing a new system of play, a flawless system which was bound to succeed.

Well! This day that the letter had come from Abner, I found that I had four cents and a subway ticket. Curse it all! It was late in October, but my vest would have to go to the pawnshop. Also the silver cigarette case which I kept for desperate emergencies. I could no longer recall the number of times it had been pawned and redeemed. It had been a good friend to me, that cigarette case, since that woman gave it me with her name, “Maggie,” reproduced in facsimile of her writing across the cover. I suppose she thought I should always carry it next to my heart. She did not foresee the coarse jokes of pawnbrokers’ assistants about “Maggie,” at which I used to smile in the hope of putting them in the humour to advance a little more.

I heard the cuckoo-clock in Mrs. Wassman’s parlour pipe out five, and decided to get up. But I lay till about half-past five. Then I dressed, wrapped my vest in a piece of newspaper, and slipped the cigarette case into my pocket. My hat was really too bad; somebody had sat on it last night. As I was studying it absentmindedly, my eyes fell on Abner’s letter on the floor near the torn photograph of the girl. Perhaps I had better see what he had to say! Then I thought it would be only giving myself useless pain to read the letter, and I went out leaving it on the floor.

I had to go uptown, and then across, to reach the pawnshop I customed. Near Madison Avenue, going toward Fifth, whom should I run upon but Abner himself! I kept my eyes down and was for shuffling by, but he hailed me.

“Hullo! Is that the way you treat your friends? Didn’t you get my letter?”

His tone was cordial; he seemed to be safe and to mean well. I could see no sign in his eyes of the dollars he had lent me.

“You look more than usually prosperous, Abner. The picture business must be booming.”

“Yes, I’ve struck a good line lately—modern Belgians—Endsor, Van Mieghem, Rik Wonters. Well, what are you going to do about it?”

“About what?”

“Why, about what I said in my letter.”

“The fact is, Abner, I forgot to read your letter.”

“Well, there it is! I said when I was dictating it that very likely you wouldn’t read it. You’ll come in for a million some day and never know it. Look here!” he said good-humouredly; and he took my arm. “Just stroll up Fifth Avenue with me, and I’ll tell you about the business.”

As we walked along he explained that a lawyer had come to see him last week on behalf of a friend who lived in a remote town in New England. The friend had presented a library to his native place, and desired to hang a portrait of himself, and also one of his wife, in the reading-room.

“I thought of you,” said Abner. “Like a flash, you came into my head. I said to myself: ‘I’ll send him up there.’ You’re just the man, and it will do you good.”

“Why this unaccustomed philanthropy?” I inquired. “I don’t want to leave New York. Besides, I am not the kind of man they are looking for. If there is money in it, and no doubt there is, seeing you have taken on the deal, why don’t you get one of those men with the well-advertised names and expensive studios? “

“Just because they have the expensive studios,” Abner drawled. “There is money in this commission, as you justly remark, but not enough money for gilt-edged ornaments of art. Do you know that you, can’t walk into the expensive studios nowadays and say you want a thing done at once? Damned if they don’t pull out their engagement-books like dentists. No, no, you’re the man I want. You’ve got talent enough, and of course you are much cheaper.”

We were now come to the square at the entrance to Central Park. He pointed to one of the hotels which stand there.

“Come in here with me and have a drink. We’ll make arrangements, and I’ll give you some money at once. You don’t want to leave New York? Why, it’s the very thing for you. I speak as a friend. You look suffering and exhausted. I suppose you *can* paint still, can’t you? How long is it since you tried?”

“Of course, as I have no money, I am not a free-agent. I’m a slave,” I said, “like most other paupers. Still, I don’t like to have my life mapped out for me by somebody else. What is more, I won’t. Let us hear what are your terms. If they are not tempting, you will have to find somebody else to paint your citizens, Abner.”

He swallowed the cocktail he had ordered. Then he mentioned the fee, which was much higher than I had expected.

“I’ll give you a hundred dollars right now,” he said, and he pulled out his cheque-book.

The project, after all, began to take a fairer light. I thought of my mean room with horror, and of Mrs. Wassman with her shrill or tearful demands for rent. Unless I won tonight upon the product of the cigarette case and my vest, I should be driven to sell the pawn-ticket, and after that I should be utterly on my beam-ends. In any case, this portrait painting would not be for long. And the change to walking out of this restaurant with a hundred dollars, instead of just my vest wrapped in newspaper to depend on, was too sweet to be resisted.

“Very well,” I said. “Hand over the hundred.”

“You’ll go tomorrow, certainly?” he asked as he tore the cheque out of his book. “No mistake?”

“Haven’t you any ready money?”

He gave me four dollars.

“Just write me a line when you get up there. I’m sending them a telegram tonight, and they will expect you tomorrow.”

He added a few directions which I wrote down.

Then we had another drink and parted.

I felt rather dazed. I had eaten very little for some days, and the spirits I had taken went to my head. I found myself about eight o’clock in the crowd on Broadway, still carrying my vest. A man and a woman got out of a motor car in front of a restaurant and I heard my name called. It was Jennie Graham, the girl who had given me her photograph the night before.

“Gee! you look ghastly,” she said. “Listen, come and be introduced to my friend.” She pointed to a man in dress-clothes who was standing a few paces away. “Then you can dine with us. He’s sure to ask you. I’ll make him.”

“I have a word for you,” I said abruptly. “That photograph you gave me last night—it came to grief. I haven’t got it any more.”

But she continued to look at me kindly. “Gee! I’m sorry for you. And there’s no help for it.”

“No help for what?”

“You’re so unhappy!” she cried. “So unhappy! I don’t believe there is another man as unhappy as you. You don’t know yourself how unhappy you are.”

I felt in my coat pockets for Abner's cheque. "Do me a favour," I said. "Keep this for me tonight, and send it down to me tomorrow morning about ten."

I gave her my address. From the door of the restaurant she turned and glanced back at me. She seemed to be still saying, in her voice made husky by too many cigarettes: "So unhappy! So unhappy!"

She sent the cheque before nine in the morning. I had come in very late and had thrown myself dressed on the bed. I went out at once to cash the cheque and came back and paid Mrs. Wassman.

That done, I sat in my room with the rest of the money in my hands. I had that peculiar feeling of contentment which comes over a man who is constantly threatened with having the bed plucked from under him, when he has secured himself a shelter for some time ahead. Mrs. Wassman would leave me in peace now for several weeks. Why go away? The sum of money I held was by no means large; but it was enough with which to try certain combinations bound to win. . . . I could see them working out before my eyes. On the other hand, if I should lose, I should lose, too, all the fee that was to come from Abner. He would get somebody else.

What a struggle! Three times I went downstairs and out into the street, and came back. The last time I decided I would not make the journey. Two minutes later, I seized my hat and ran downstairs, and made for a street car. In the car I arranged that I would give myself only a minute to catch the train. If there should be people blocking the way at the ticket-window, I would be too late, and there was not another train all day. Accordingly, I hung about the streets neighbouring the station, and then lounged in at the last minute. The ticket-window was clear! I boarded the train just as it was moving out.

In the train, I sat feeling as if I were drowned. There was a thin whining in my ears; I could think of nothing. The struggle had spent me. The first clear thought I had, came in about an hour, and it was that I had not told Mrs. Wassman I was leaving. Such few things as I owned were still in that square, dismal room. Abner's letter and the torn photograph were still lying on the floor.

At a town where I had to wait over an hour to connect with another train, I thought I had better buy a few necessary things. I should have to walk in on those people with a paper parcel for baggage, but it could not be helped. Besides, I did not care.

They lived in a good-sized house standing well back from a little street bordered with trees. Something unfriendly and depressing emanated from the house as soon as you crossed the threshold. If I were a practised writer, I suppose I could bring the sensation home to you; but as it is, it baffles me to realise it on paper. It was not so much a sensation of mystery as of secrecy. Those who had died in that house, in the seventy years or more it had been standing, had not quite gone away; something of them remained in the still rooms. At mealtimes there always seemed to be some other presence, or presences, at the table besides the master and mistress of the house.

The word for them is subdued. They were subdued to the atmosphere of their house, to their traditions, to the naïve furniture they sat among. This unprotesting acquiescence in the unlovely was, of course, to be expected, given the locality. The tradition was the same as that of the British small tradesman, nonconformist in religion and politics—the stock they originated from. Dreary and unpicturesque religion had no doubt in the first place inspired the dreary and unpicturesque surroundings. In a community which had never opened its eyes to any of the arts except literature, and to that only on its unartistic side, the absence of any testimony to æsthetic needs was not surprising. What did surprise, as one glanced about and the lack of any personal touch became more and more distressing, was that they had conceded so far to an unfamiliar

spirit as to have their portraits painted. Certainly they were the very first of their family to make this concession.

That first night neither of them affected me beyond a consciousness that they were there and that I was their guest. It is true that I felt sick, and desperate, and sorry to my heart I had come there; and I was unable to study them accurately. But in the days that followed, when I had become more resigned and clearheaded, they remained so antipathetic and irritating that I used to invent all sorts of excuses to be as little with them as I could manage.

David Sheriff was null. He struck me as one of the innumerable men who live out their lives without ever realising themselves. He was president of the local bank, as his father had been before him, and had, by the report of the town, much money; though beyond whatever pleasure came from the consciousness that he was rich, he got no pleasure or profit of any kind, that I could see, out of his wealth. In our intercourse he always remembered he was paying me; he was very far indeed from that stage of civilisation which breeds the patron of artists, who feels himself less the obliger than the obliged. He was perhaps fifty-five, with a lot of loose black hair parted in the middle over a square forehead, protruding at the top, and a plump face—one of the most usual types of American. He had suffered a stroke of palsy two or three years ago, and now and then his hands trembled violently, and his head nodded a little. It was easy to see that the gift of this library to his native town he regarded as the central event of his career; it was never long out of his conversation. He had not yet got over his astonishment at his own generosity. It seemed even that he was not quite at his ease about this, for he kept talking to justify himself, to prove to himself he was right—that he had not thrown away money on a toy.

“Was it your own notion?” I asked one day when I was painting him. From the moment I had set eyes on him, I had decided upon the kind of thing I was going to turn out—something after the manner of the John S. Sargent official portrait. It was weary work; I had no heart for it, and I was often on the point of kicking my easel across the room. I took a long pull at the coffee I had standing by me. “Did you think of it all out of your own head?” I asked him insolently enough.

“Well, n—no,” he hesitated. “It was more my wife’s idea.”

“But your wife’s name is Miriam, isn’t it? Why do you call the library the Abigail Sheriff Memorial? Was Abigail Sheriff your daughter?”

I was feeling all the time that I should like to throttle some of his money out of him, and besides, the plan of his ridiculous library filled me with contempt. But, although I put my crude questions roughly, he showed no resentment. On the contrary, he smiled for some reason or other in a deprecating way and looked a little confused.

“The fact is, Abigail Sheriff was my wife’s sister. She was my first wife. She died—painful memories—” He ended in a mutter. “It was my wife’s idea,” he said again.

I did not feel any active rancour toward this fool; it was mere exasperation. I hardly remembered him when I was not in his presence. But his wife, Miriam Sheriff, I disliked intensely, with that kind of dislike which makes one hate the thought of some persons. She was tall and thin and dark and looked considerably younger than her husband. Her thin lips, pressed close together, indicated a life spent in self-repression, and a long habit of silence. When you saw her, what struck you first was an impression of gauntness, the gauntness noticeable in sufferers from consumption, especially if they are tall; and next, in a secondary way, an impression of flame, and, so to speak, of frigid rage, as if she moved among the contingencies of life warily; and resented that she had so to move. Withal she was handsome, with a kind of handsomeness which repelled rather than attracted, and indeed made no effort to attract. She had extraordinary brown eyes, under long lashes which I could not help looking at, which nobody,

such was their magnetism, could help looking at, although they were weary and veiled and somehow quenched, whether from looking out on tedious days or too much weeping. A mole on the cheek near the lips added to the peculiar fascination of the face, by relieving the bitter expression of the mouth. You thought as you looked at her: "Here is a woman who has suffered much, whose spirit has been outraged and perhaps mortally wounded." You thought that, I say, but you felt no compassion. I even went so far as to fancy that the fine, tragic face was an accident of nature, covering nothing more than a soul as shallow and peevish as any of her neighbours. She was often in fits of black silence which nobody dared to interrupt,—brooding, despondent, and, as I thought, almost torpid. When she did talk it was invariably of the town and the people round about. Some of her characterisations were searing and drew protests from her husband. I learned that the inhabitants of the town disliked her, and were dreadfully afraid of her. Me, she seemed to make a point of ignoring as much as she could; she would talk past me to her husband when we were all three together. Even when I looked at her she always looked quickly away. From some things she said, I gathered that she disapproved of the pursuit of art.

"All those boys and girls in New York and Boston, who are studying painting, want an excuse not to do any real work," she said once in her bitter way. "I know nothing about art," she said another time.

"You are like me," I said, "in that."

"You? You live by it, don't you?"

"No, I can't live by it. Bless you, I ain't got enough punch."

"You are not serious," she murmured; and she fell into one of her abstracted fits, twining and untwining her slim fingers in her lap while she stared with her dark frown at a point on the floor.

I had begun to paint her now, and accordingly she was obliged to speak to me more than she had done hitherto. My intention had been to brush out a portrait of her in exactly the same style as the one I had done of her husband. But I had been more and more struck by that fugitive look in her eyes, that unwillingness to meet my gaze, as if behind the eyes were a hunted soul seeking madly for refuge. This look, so much in contrast to the hard composure of the face, always interested me, especially as soon as I noticed that I was the only person who called it forth. At her husband, and at everybody else, she looked steadily, with impatient tolerance, and it was their eyes which shifted before hers.

It weighed with me so much that after the first sittings I threw aside my canvas and began again in an altogether different style. I thought to paint something phantom-like, swooning and imprecise, after the manner of Eugene Carrière. Thus, it seemed to me, I had the best chance of catching the soul; and it was the soul, lurking behind those eyes, I wanted to draw forth.

Now, after I had been working at this for some days, I was puzzled and disturbed by an inexplicable alteration in the picture. I was satisfied with my work, which I scarcely ever am; and during the sittings, while Mrs. Sheriff was in front of me, it seemed to me that I was doing just what I had set out to do—drawing forth her soul. But one morning, when the picture was beginning to take its final shape, I could not believe the report of my eyes when I examined it.

This was not a portrait of Mrs. Sheriff I was doing; it was a portrait of somebody else; somebody I had never seen before. It was as if you were to see, after you had written a letter, a letter in your handwriting, but upon a subject altogether different from what you thought you had written about, upon a subject, in fact, of which you had no cognisance. I was extremely frightened; I feared I was going out of my mind. I looked still more attentively at the canvas, and I fancied I saw a vague look of Jennie Graham, the girl back there in New York. Yes, there was a vague suggestion of what I can only call the "forgiveness" of her face in the face I had painted.

“That’s it!” I thought furiously. “The delusions are beginning. They were bound to begin. Why did I ever come to this damned hole?”

I had not a sitting with Mrs. Sheriff that morning because she had to go to a funeral. I was very glad of it. I resolved to give up the work and start for New York. The husband’s portrait was finished:

Abner would have to find somebody else to do the wife, somebody who had not suffered from strain and hardship and disappointment, whose vision was unimpaired.

I went out of doors about one. It was a clear autumn day with a soft and humid air stirring. There was a wood, spreading over many miles beyond the town, where I was used to walk, or just to lie on my back among the leaves. There the year was dying like a love-lorn queen, yielding herself passionately to death. And I took comfort in those woods, and the dreamy, dappled light, that was shed there. My mood changed. . . .

In truth, that land there is like a woman. It embraces you with all its colour and softness, and entrances and lulls like a love-philtre. Lying caressed under its gold and crimson, plunged in its ever-changing, ever-offering beauty, time is no more. You want nothing of the naïve and unwise turmoil of the marketplace; content to let the days slip through your fingers like the variously coloured beads of a rosary. That is all. To lie close to nature, very close, seeing nothing but the spacious day and the soft low brows of the night, was all I wanted now. I was bewitched by the land. It looked at me, with all its entrancement, so reproachfully: “How can you go away?” That life back there of a month ago—Mrs. Wassman, the mulatto, the dingy bedroom, the foul air and the grinding anxiety—what a hideous dream!

But also, what a state I had fallen into to paint my portrait like that! It was not that I had lost my skill, because, as I recalled the picture out here in the woods, it seemed to me that I had never done anything so good. But it was a portrait of somebody I had never seen. And yet the husband’s portrait had come out all right; it was an honest, workmanlike portrait, entirely unoriginal, a shameless *pastiche* of Sargent, which any public body would be glad to accept with speechifying. But when I thought of the other, I shuddered with horror. And I began to blame the model, that horrible Mrs. Sheriff. My feeling for her now was hatred.

I spent the afternoon in the woods. Toward evening I came upon an opening which gave upon a bay, an arm of the sea.

I had been trying to recall, as I walked, anything special about Mrs. Sheriff. Up to this I had taken no interest in her, but now I had the vivid interest we feel in anything we hate or dread. I remembered that on the second night I was there, I had asked David Sheriff how old his house was, and upon hearing his reply, I had said, as a flourish, that in every house which has been standing long a corpse lies under the hearthstone. He had received this with the usual chuckle which he uttered when anything amused him. But his wife had seemed extremely angry, and spoke hardly another word during the evening. This was plainly the whim of a stupid, provincial woman, who looked on any kind of plain speaking as bad manners.

What else was there? I could not remember anything. Oh, yes! There was that night it was blowing so hard, and in an excess of boredom I had said inanely that I wondered the entrance door was not blown open. The wind was really pounding on the windows. But Mrs. Sheriff had evidently taken my remark as an insult to her house, and rose abruptly from the table (we were at dinner) and did not appear again. Her husband apologised for her, a little awkwardly I thought. The next day, when I saw Mrs. Sheriff I excused myself, and explained that I had not meant to

imply that her house was not sound; but she brushed my excuses aside as of no consequence in her frigid way. "What a disagreeable woman!" I said to myself for the hundredth time.

I was thinking that now, as I stood facing the bay. Looking seaward, about two miles away to the west, were the capes; between them the breakers, always tumbling just there, were gleaming; and behind them the sun was going down. The sky was a blaze of harmonies; wilder lights, such ineffable beauty, I had not seen than on that ending day. It seemed as if the light were pouring through a gorge which led on and on to the end of the world, into eternity. It was the gate of heaven. It was sheer nature, untarnished by any touch of man. Thus, and no otherwise, must the scene have lain before the eyes of the lonely Indian, when, on this day and at this hour, six hundred years ago, he stood on this spot and stared at the sunset. Nothing—absolutely nothing was there to indicate the presence of man.

That is, looking far out to sea, as I was doing. But as my gaze shortened, there appeared on an elevation of the ground, a space clear of trees a hundred yards or more in front of me, a woman's figure, standing solitary and black in the intensely clear light of the sunset-tide. I knew her at once, both by her unusual tallness and also by something special in her hearing. It was Mrs. Sheriff. She was, as I say, clad all in black: she must have come straight here from the funeral. She had her back to me, looking toward the sunset; and even as I saw her she stretched out her arms and then drew them in to her breast—a gesture of yearning and embrace. Then I saw her drop on her knees, and she bowed down till her head touched the ground. She must have remained nearly a minute in that position: I know it was long enough for me to fear she had died. At last she rose and walked a little unsteadily nearer to where I lingered till she came to a tall tree which stood solitary, with its russet leaves touched to something more exquisite by the sunset. She stood gazing for a time at this tree, and then suddenly she flung her arms about the trunk and pressed her lips to the rugged bark.

"She is a madwoman," I thought.

I determined to slip away, if possible, without letting her see me. But, to strike a path, I had to move toward where she stood; and the leaves and dead twigs rustled and crackled under my feet. She turned and saw me.

She started violently, and stood resting one hand on the tree and the other held over her heart. She was evidently astonished to see anybody in this lone place. But in a moment she had recovered herself. She had recognised me; and she came forward without hesitation or reluctance, as it seemed, though she still wavered in her walk.

I have already described her, and you picture her as repellent. Certainly that is how she had impressed me. But as she came toward me now in the sunset, I thought I had never seen anybody so beautiful. It was an unearthly beauty; a radiance encircled her; her face was transfigured. About her lips and in her eyes was a smile tender and welcoming, such as I had never seen before; it was clear that she did not at all resent my presence. I felt that she was even glad I was there.

"You saw me at my devotions?"

Now that she was close by, I perceived that her eyes were dilated and that she was panting a little from some strange emotion which was too strong for her sorely labouring heart. I muttered ungraciously that I had only just caught a glimpse of her as I was searching for the path.

"We own these woods," she said. "Nobody ever comes here except in the middle of summer, and very few at any time."

Then, as if unable longer to bear these trivialities of convention, she impulsively seized my hand.

“Oh, I am so glad you have come! I have always wished to see you in this place, because I am natural here, I am myself. I know you will understand me. I felt the very first night you came that you understood me; and I could never look at you afterward because I knew you were reading my soul.”

She paused, coughed a little, and touched her lips with a handkerchief. I thought I saw a blood-stain on it, but it may have been the uncertain light. “I knew you would sympathise with me,” she said.

“Yes. But how did you know?”

“Because you are so unhappy—so unhappy!” she cried out in a kind of transport. “We understand each other by that. I love you,—I love you, because you are so unhappy.”

I plucked away my hand. Her words brought Jennie Graham to my mind, and I remembered the vague likeness to Jennie Graham in my unfortunate portrait. I had Jennie Graham on the brain! She was beginning to haunt me, apparently! Mrs. Sheriff’s repetition of Jennie Graham’s words vexed me beyond control. I moved a few paces away.

But she came up to me and seized my hand again, and put her face so close to mine that I felt her breath warm on my cheek. “Listen, you will understand me. Sometimes I think I am hanging to that tree yonder—that tree I love—nailed to it, with two burning nails through the palms of my hands, and my face to the west looking down the bay toward the sunset. Tell me, do you ever think that?”

Her eyes were wild and imploring; there was agony in the broken sound of her voice. “She is mad,” I thought again. “You are a sun-worshipper?” I said tolerantly for the sake of saying something.

She looked at me as if she did not quite understand what I said. Then her expression changed to something like ecstasy. “Oh, the sun! I love the sun. Yes, I worship it—that is the right word. I kneel to it, most of all when it is setting. I think when it is going—If this should be the last time I shall ever see it!—If I should die before tomorrow? And then I think that to die means to be merged into all that glory, and it is the greatest happiness. You are not angry because I say these things to you—not angry at all? I have always lived here; I have never been anywhere else. I love the sea. And the leaves on the trees now—I love them, the beautiful things, beautiful for themselves alone. Nobody sees them. They grow more beautiful and beautiful and then they die, and nobody has seen them. Sometimes I think they are a little lonesome; that is why I kiss and comfort them. But most times I think that that is the way to be beautiful—only for yourself—to create beauty only for yourself, and care not at all whether it is praised or not. Tell me what you think. I think so much by myself—all day long. All day and often all night. I don’t know whether my thoughts are right or not. But you can tell me, because you sympathise with me. You see my soul.”

I stared at her, lost in wonder. This spirit so absorbed in a passion for beauty—a far stronger passion than I had myself, perhaps stronger and more disinterested than the passion of any artist living—how it must have starved! What a power of self-repression; what an iron will she had shown to go on living her life in stagnant ugliness, the deliberate elimination of the charm of existence! I thought of her house. How her cabined soul must have beaten against those walls!

“Your trees, decked for themselves alone, are the true aristocrats,” I said for the sake of an answer. I was not thinking of what I said.

She looked at the ground with the frown she always had when she was in one of her reveries.

“All my life I have loved beauty,” she said slowly at last. “Beauty and love—those are all I care for. I have only been able to find them in nature. I have never been away or seen things. Tell

me, should I have found a greater love and beauty than in the trees here, and the sea, and the sunset, and the first star?"

"No," I answered positively. "As to love I cannot speak. But for beauty, you would have found no greater beauty, because the world has no greater beauty to give."

"Do you think they do not love us?"

"I don't know. You, perhaps—you are nearer to them than I am. I think they are indifferent."

She pondered this again in the same way, staring at the ground. "Let us go home," she said at length.

We walked, side by side, in silence. I was not inclined to talk, and even if I had been, it was impossible to talk the vulgar' gossip of life to this woman. After we had gone about a quarter of a mile, we came upon the trunk of a fallen tree lying across the path.

"Sit down here," she said.

I placed myself beside her on the log and she threw her arm lightly about my shoulders. Nothing this extraordinary woman did could startle me now. In what way exactly she regarded me, I could not tell; but she had established in her mind some kind of comradeship between us. It would soon be dusk. The far shore of the bay was glowing in crimson and orange, with the trees in a black close mass, like a span of velvet below. One star gleamed in the serene air. Far off in the woods a little owl began to cry. In the gathering shadows, she turned on me a face which I could see was quivering with anguish.

"You are so unhappy, so unutterably unhappy. Tell me, have you ever committed a crime?"

I tried to laugh. "Yes, numbers," I said uncomfortably.

"Oh, I don't mean faults—sins. They are of no importance. You mean sins, don't you? But I mean crime, a great crime. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Yes, I think I do."

"And have you?"

"No."

"Ah!" . . . I do not know what that sigh, which arose from the depths of her stuffed bosom, signified—whether relief, or, shocking as it may sound, disappointment. Her arm dropped from my shoulders.

After a moment she spoke again: "What did you mean when you said that night—you know, the second or third night you were here—that in every house which has been standing many years a corpse lies under the hearthstone? Do you remember? It struck me very much. What did you mean?"

"What did I mean? I don't know what I meant. I spoke just to—I meant nothing."

"Listen, shall I tell you what I think you meant? You meant that people do things, perhaps without thinking, that kill other people. Is that it?"

"Yes, something like that."

"You mean there are many more people who have killed other people than are known?"

"Yes, or than know it themselves even. We are very lucky if we can get through life without killing anybody. Have those who lived in your house before you never killed anybody? Just think a minute. Have they never discharged a dependent unfairly, or in a fit of anger? Perhaps that act eventually killed the dependent, either by rendering him or her hopeless, or in some other way. Did they never leave a man or woman in despair? Did they never nag or humiliate or take unjust advantage? Did they never bear false witness? Did they never put the law in motion to extract the last penny from the poor? Then there are letters that kill. There are a thousand things that kill. Oh, yes, we are very lucky if we get through life without killing somebody."

“Or being killed?” she asked in a whisper.

“There are those that don’t kill.”

“Is it kill or be killed?”

“No; not that—”

She jumped up from the log and stood before me in the unreal light, looking taller than ever in her black mourning gown. She stretched out her arms full length, with her slender hands loosely open.

“I want you to kill me!” she said.

I shall never forget how she said it. If she had been asking me to love her, to kiss her, she could not have looked at me with greater sorcery. “Kill me!” she repeated breathlessly. “No, don’t interrupt—hear me out. You will do it, I know, because I love you. I have been waiting for you to come, so long, and when you came I knew you saw my soul. And I said to myself—when I tell him all, when I explain, he will kill me. Listen, it will be quite safe. I have a private fortune; I will leave it all to you. We shall settle the details. Oh, I want to die. Only those who want to die, cannot die. That woman whose funeral I was at today, she wanted to live. I want to die and I have not the courage to kill myself. But you will kill me, my friend.”

I sat there motionless under some evil spell.

“You will do it?” she cried, and on her face, which she bent down close to mine, was a smile of wild rapture.

I shuddered: I felt that something terrible and yet lovely was brooding over me. Then, I pulled myself together, and rose sharply to my feet. “What strange things you say, Mrs. Sheriff! You have everything to live for, money and comfort. Your husband will be wondering what has become of you. Let us hurry back.”

We walked the rest of the way without speaking another word. I was very much shaken. I was convinced she was irresponsible. She was plainly ill and in agonies of wretchedness. I thought I heard her sob in the darkness. . . .

But at dinner she was still and frigid as usual. She spoke hardly at all to me, but she no longer avoided my eyes. Two or three times she gazed at me so long and intently that I thought her husband would remark it. I must have had some sympathy with her, as she said; for although I had seen so much misery from poverty and had endured so much misery myself from the same cause that I had little pity for miseries which did not arise from lack of money or were not accompanied by penury, yet I found myself pitying Mrs. Sheriff. I even went so far as to point out to David Sheriff when we were alone together that same evening that his wife’s health needed care.

“Oh, she’s all right,” he mumbled. “She’s been like that for years. There’s nothing the matter with her.”

The next morning, when she came as usual to sit to me for an hour in the loft, which I had chosen on account of the light to work in, she greeted me hardly at all, and seemed more absorbed and restrained and withdrawn from the life around her than ever. Did she even remember how she had been in the wood the day before? It was quite possible she did not. Such outbursts of emotion, I thought, are often followed by a blank. The exhausted spirit can bear no more.

Still, watching her as she sat there listless, I regarded her otherwise than I had done on other mornings. I knew now that there were certain subjects she would respond to. Up to this it had never occurred to me to ask her opinion, any more than the opinion of her husband, about my

work. David Sheriff, it is true, had shown some interest in his own portrait; what he was anxious about was the likeness, he wanted something that “the boys” would recognise. He used to stand awhile sometimes looking over my shoulder, like children do about a painter who is painting out-of-doors. But she never showed the slightest curiosity; she had never glanced at either picture. She submitted to be painted.

But I remembered this morning that the impression which a woman with a sense of beauty so developed took from a picture would be worth having. I said something like this to her.

She started, roused out of her dream. “My sense of beauty?” she murmured with a wry little smile. “Poor me!”

I turned round her husband’s portrait from the wall and held it up before her. She looked hard at it for a little, not at all like a connoisseur of the fine arts, but as one trying rather to gather some fact or facts from it, as if she were reading a letter. Then she sighed.

“It is very good,” she said; “very like. It is also very cruel. You were angry when you painted it. You did it against your will, did you not? As for beauty, it is not beautiful at all. Beauty is not hard like that. There is more peace and repose and—what do you call it?—detachment in beauty, I think. That is not beautiful like a tree or a flower; it is ugly, like a man at a tea-party in a small town—our town here.”

I was a little nettled, perhaps because what she said struck home. “I am afraid you are too classic for me,” I scoffed. “You are akin to Lessing and Goethe. I hardly dare to show you what I have done with yourself.”

The picture was resting on the easel covered with a cloth. “You will bear in mind,” I continued, “that it is not quite finished. A strange thing has happened to me with it. I have been trying to paint you, what I saw in you. But what has come out is not you; it is a portrait of somebody I never saw. And yet I saw her *in* you. I have been ill and miserable and poor; perhaps my vision has become affected. But you can judge for yourself. Look!” And I drew away the cloth.

I have said that I was trying to paint my picture in the style of Eugene Carrière. That great artist’s power of bringing the body to the very confines of life, of catching the twilight between the temporal and spiritual, of seizing the human frame when it is swooning away and the ghost emerging, I had thought of when I set out to paint this strange Miriam Sheriff. But my work was not a mere imitation of Carrière—that I swear; it was the best picture I had ever painted, or can ever hope now to paint.

Mrs. Sheriff seemed at first unwilling to look at it. Then, visibly putting some constraint on herself, she turned toward the picture resolutely. She gave a low cry and pressed her left hand against her side with her habitual gesture. I thought she was going to fall. But she turned away and hurried from the room.

Almost before I had time to be astonished I heard her light foot on the stairs coming up again. She put a photograph into my hands.

“Is that the face you saw?” she asked.

It was the photograph of a young woman dressed after the fashion of fifteen or twenty years ago. She had a handsome face, very unusual; and it was this face I had painted. But in the photographed face there was something sensual, defiant, even sullen; whereas in my picture it was as if the same woman had passed through some purgatory and come forth a thousand times purified.

“It is my sister Abigail,” said Mrs. Sheriff. “I never *see* her like that photograph. I always see her, just behind my eyes, with that look of forgiving as she is in your picture. That is how she looked a few minutes before she died.” She paused, and then added quietly: “I murdered her.”

“For Heaven’s sake, don’t say such a terrible thing!”

“That face is what you saw *in* me, as you said just now. I knew all the time you were seeing it and drawing it out of me. I made up my mind several days ago to tell you all about it. I am going to tell you.”

“Not here in this house?”

She glanced carelessly round the walls. “Well, no. Perhaps not in the house. I had rather be out in the open. You remember that tree where you saw me yesterday? Go there this afternoon.”

I was first at the tryst by a good hour. It looked as if she were not coming, and I felt infinitely relieved. I ought to have resisted her impulse to make me her confidant. If she had a tragedy in her life, why should I burthen myself with it? Surely I had enough already to weigh me down. That portrait—what flaw in eye or brain, what casting-off from the wharves of life and voyaging into the unpathed seas of the invisible world, did that portend?

But when, at last, I sighted her in the distance, the forebodings which had been so heavy upon me since morning suddenly appeared idle. Perhaps the reason was that she was not garbed in black, as she had been yesterday, but wore the many-coloured costume of a woman who lives in the country and is much out-of-doors. These healthy clothes, the soft hat she had on, her bright muffler, her rough gloves and her walking-stick, took her out of time isolation in which I had been seeing her, and established a relation between her and ordinary, average women of commonplace existence. Her appearance now was so inconsistent with the vision of her making that appalling confession in the morning that—I reminded myself once more—that she must be suffering from hallucinations and that she had perhaps forgotten by this time why she had brought me there.

But when she was drawing near, a little breathless as if she had hurried, I saw the countenance—cold, and indifferent, and repelling in advance any attempt at intimacy—which she kept for the town, vanish, really as if she had cast off a mask; and there came into her haunted eyes a look of even more intense anguish than I had seen yesterday.

“You won’t be able to worship the sun this afternoon,” I said, in a trivial tone, attempting to start the conversation.

It was indeed a dull, soundless day, with low-hanging clouds. Ever and anon the sun, concealed by clouds, sent forth a shaft of light which was not sunshine. The bay lay glassy smooth, the colour of slate. The leaves had lost their colour and looked dead and shrivelled on the branches, ready to fall. While I had been sitting still there, I had actually *heard* them dying, a strange dim crackling noise which began, and then ceased, and began once more. . . .

I had spoken to her, as I say, in jest, but in her reply was great solemnity.

“I don’t think I shall ever be able to look at the sun again. Not since I saw what I saw this morning.”

She meant my picture. “You make too much of it,” I said to soothe her.

“Abigail, my sister, and I used to come to this place when we were quite little,” she went on dreamily. “She used to stand with her back against that tree over there, to see if she was taller than I was. How strange that seems after all this time! She always wanted to be taller than I was. David Sheriff, who is my husband now, used to measure us. He used to cut notches in the tree. I wonder if they are there still? I never thought to look till now.

“He was our cousin, but much older than we were. I loved David when I was a little girl; and when I grew up I loved him. He loved Abigail, but she cared nothing at all for him. We had not much money then. David’s father was well-to-do, but Abigail and I lived with our mother, who was a widow. Then sister made up her mind to go to Boston and take up business there. It was

the best thing she could do if she would not marry David. She was always quarrelsome with mother—with me, too.

“I don’t know just what she did in Boston. Mother used to send her money sometimes. She was cashier in some large store. She got mixed up with a man who was also employed in the store, and he persuaded her to steal money for him. It must have been for him. Then they found her out and arrested her.

“David was going to marry me. I was so glad and so was mother. But when this news came he hurried to Boston. He stood up in court and said he had always loved her, and that if they would let her go he would marry her and pay back the money she had taken. They did let her go on these terms, and sister married him at once.

“That was like a knife in my side. I had begun to get my trousseau together. Now there was no more hope. What made it worse was that the very first flight they came home, I saw that Abigail hated David, though he was crazy about her. She only loved the man for whom she had stolen, and he had disappeared.

“She was surly and hard and defiant. She looked as she looks in that photograph I showed you; it was taken a few days after they came home. She was unwell. She had a cold when she arrived and coughed a good deal. She didn’t seem to care. Soon she had to stay in bed.

“I went over from mother’s to nurse her. Sister was terribly querulous and unkind to everybody, but especially to David. She accused him of forcing her into marriage, and declared that she would never be a wife to him.

“She got worse, and the thought came to me from outside my head—I remember that quite well—it seemed to enter my head from outside: If she was to die, David would be free.

“Then one evening the doctor came, and said she was much better. She looked better. She was not going to die after all! And a terrible thing came into my head. It was something the doctor said that suggested it. It was a rough winter night with a terrific gale up—I don’t think I have ever heard the wind blow so loud since. The doctor gave sister a sleeping-powder and said she must be kept warm. ‘If she gets through this night well,’ he told us, ‘she will mend quickly.’ Then he said as he was going that he hoped the windows and doors were strong or the wind might blow them in.

“I was to sit up all night with sister. When the clock struck one I looked at her. She was sleeping well with her head on her arm; she was very warm and her skin was moist. We were in that room you have now: you know it almost faces the stairs and the street door. We had padded the cracks in the door to keep out the draughts, for the bed was near the door and it had not been possible to move it.

“I stole downstairs and opened the street door. Then I went back upstairs and left the bedroom door open and drew the blankets off sister. The icy wind came streaming into the room. I opened the window to make more of a draught, and sat there shivering, hoping it would kill me too. I did not want to live; I only wanted David to be free from the unhappy life before him with sister.

“After a while she stirred and began to cough. But she did not wake up. Cough—cough—cough—I hear that often. But she never woke up. About half-past four I went down and shut the door. If anybody had passed and seen the door open he would have thought it was the gale. But nobody passed.

“I came upstairs again and closed the bedroom door and the window. Then something terrible happened. I heard steps coming slowly upstairs—heavy, deliberate steps like an old man’s. Then there came three loud knocks at the door. I jumped into the bed beside sister and covered my

head with the blankets. I wonder I did not die from terror. I waited to hear the steps go away from the door. But they did not go away. It was death that had come.

“Sister woke up and began to cry. She was much worse. When David was up he went for the doctor. But sister Abigail died toward nightfall.” .

We had been standing all this time. There was a distorted smile about her mouth. Then she pressed her fingers to her breast, and turned round and stood with her back to me.

“Perhaps it was not that,” I said at last, uneasily, in a low voice.

“Yes, it was that. The doctor said she must have got a sudden chill—”

We were silent again, for a long time. I could think of nothing to say. At last, wanting to say something, I stammered: “You have your husband, the man you love—”

She turned round quickly. Her eyes were quite dry. The imploring smile had gone from her face.

“Yes, I have him,” she replied in a hard voice. “You see what he is. That is my punishment.”

Then she looked at me intently, straight into the eyes. “Now you hate me,” she said.

“Hate you? Oh, you poor creature!”

“Then kiss me,” she said, “if you cannot hate me.”

I took her head between my hands and kissed her on the forehead.

“Will you kill me *now*?” she whispered insidiously.

“Oh, my God—no.”

“But you were sent for that. That is what the picture means.”

“I don’t know what it means. But not that. Never think it.”

“Then good-bye—and forever—my friend, my brother.”

She walked quickly away in the dusk and I did not follow her.

She did not appear at dinner that evening; she had a headache, her husband said. About nine o’clock I went up to the loft and cut my picture into strips. I felt as if I were stabbing a living creature. I burned the strips in the stove which was there. Then I came down and told David Sheriff that I had fulfilled the contract for his own portrait, but that I found I could make no headway with the portrait of Mrs. Sheriff and so I was going away in the morning.

“Call yourself a painter?” he said. “Why, she ought to be easier than me. She can sit still, I know that.” He chuckled, but he was evidently put out.

“I daresay Mr. Abner can find you some one else—”

“Well, no. I guess not. I guess it’s my picture the folks want to see down in that library.” He added that he used to do some drawing himself in his young days. “Over there in the woods, near the bay, I used to draw my cousins. I used to stand them against a tree and cut notches in it to mark their height.”

A few months later Abner showed me a newspaper which he had received from David Sheriff. It was a local paper and it gave a full account of the opening of the Abigail Sheriff Memorial Library. My portrait of David Sheriff had been much praised by the orators. There was no mention of a portrait of Mrs. Sheriff, and it was said that she herself had been absent from the ceremony, “owing to illness.”