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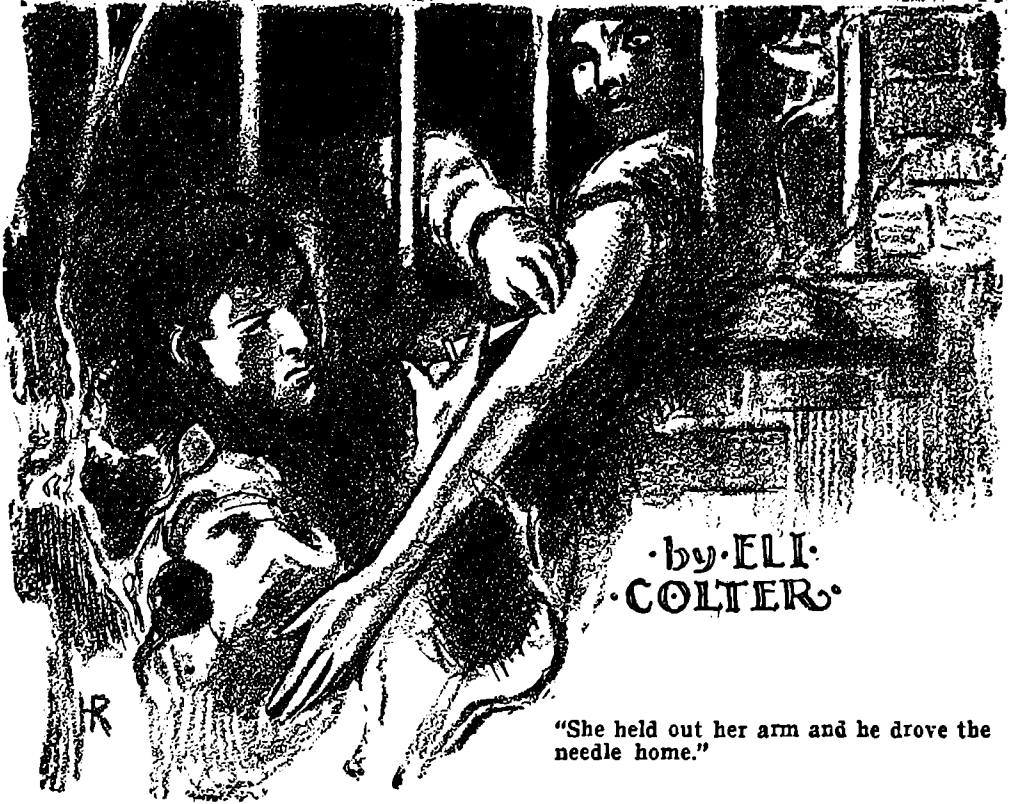
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# The MAN-in-the-GREEN-COAT.



·by·ELI·  
·COLTER·

"She held out her arm and he drove the needle home."

**G**RANT THORPE lounged comfortably in a big easy chair and looked across at Myron Tobin, his host. They two were alone in the big library of Tobin's palatial home, smoking a sociable cigar and drinking an after-dinner cocktail before the massive fireplace. Tobin saw the unveiled curiosity in the gray eyes of Grant Thorpe, and he had an idea he knew the cause of it. But he said nothing. He turned his gaze on the leaping flames in the grate and continued smoking in silence. Thorpe was bluntly outspoken. When his curiosity began to ride him hard enough he would come out with it baldly.

Thorpe was mulling over in his mind the thing that had aroused his

curiosity. There had been a large and impressive reception in Tobin's huge house that evening, and after the departure of the guests Thorpe and his host had gravitated naturally to the library with their liquor and cigars. The two men had been friends for twenty years, but for eight years they had seen nothing of each other. When they had parted eight years before, Thorpe had gone to Egypt on a little private business of his own. He had left the United States harboring not a little concern over his old friend Myron Tobin.

Tobin, at that time, was decidedly down on his luck, which was nothing at all unusual for Tobin. He hadn't a cent in the world, and he had a little prospect for the future as he

had money. He had ever been very much of a dreamer, cherishing the hope of sometime stumbling upon a formula, concerning no matter what, that would bring him wealth, set the world by the ears and make him famous. He had fiddled along ineffectually with chemicals and metals, accomplishing precisely nothing. Thorpe had bade him good-bye rather sadly. He liked Tobin. He hated leaving him poverty-stricken with hunger, lean with futile hopes, but too stubbornly wedded to his dreams to desert them for any more practical method of achieving wealth and fame. But he knew Tobin. So he shook his hand, sighed, shrugged and went on his way.

And eight years later Thorpe returned from Egypt, to find Tobin as wealthy and famous as he had ever painted himself in his wildest visions. Tobin had found his formula, and it had set the world by the ears right enough. No one knew what it was, and no one was ever likely to know. It was guarded rigidly. But it had brought him fabulous wealth, and the very secrecy attached to it had served to thrust Tobin's name willy-nilly into the notice of the world.

But it was nothing of this that had aroused Thorpe's curiosity. That which had caught and held Thorpe's attention and puzzled him to the point of irritation was a man. Tobin had a host of moneyed and influential friends. The house had been full of them that evening. But among them, moving about and making himself at home with an ease of manner that was distinctly noticeable, was the mysterious man who had held Thorpe's eye and baffled his brain.

He was a small man, with a thin, dried-up body and a great knob of a head as ugly and repellant as the head of a mummy. His long, narrow eyes, as hard as granite and as gray, seemed to be everywhere at once. His lank, drab hair fell over his forehead continually, in a peculiarly offensive

fashion. He was conspicuous in the throng of correctly dressed men and women for the fact that he wore a bright green coat that fell to his knees. Thorpe could not have told what other garments clothed the man. Shirt, vest, trousers and shoes were rendered unworthy of notice by that spotted and worn vivid green coat.

The guests paid no attention to him, and he paid none to them. Thorpe had seen a few people address politely perfunctory remarks to him. He had made no reply; in fact, he did not speak at all. He moved in and about among the rest of the guests with an oddly proprietary manner, as though he belonged there. He gazed upon the magnificent appointments of the room, the statuary, the murals on the walls, the great shining grand piano, with an air of personal pride in them.

But the most conspicuous thing about him was his absorption in Tobin's strikingly beautiful wife. Whenever his long, hard eyes fell upon her, his ugly face lit with a passion of worship as intense as it was unmistakable. Thorpe frowned upon it, inwardly. He wondered if it were possible that Tobin was unaware of the violent affection lavished upon his wife by the man in the green coat. But no, he couldn't be. Impossible. And Thorpe resented it. It was unlike Myron Tobin to allow anything like that to be so blatantly paraded before his guests and under his eyes. There was something hidden about it that made Thorpe uneasy. He moved restlessly in the chair and asked bluntly:

"Who is the man in the green coat?"

Tobin had been waiting for that question. He knew the explanation would have to come to Thorpe. That he conceded, in view of their years-long close friendship. So far as anyone else was concerned, those who didn't like the man in the green coat

could go to the devil. And they could stay away from Tobin's house. His guests and associates had long since learned to tacitly ignore the man's presence. But Thorpe was different. Tobin wanted Thorpe to know.

"Have you ever looked up the word 'gratitude' in the dictionary, Grant?" Tobin asked softly. "To the man in the green coat I owe everything I am and have today. He comes and goes as he will. I never know when to expect him, never can tell when he may suddenly walk in and greet me with that flashing smile of his. Did you notice his smile? How it changes and softens his face? He knows how welcome he is; knows that no matter who is here, no matter what I am doing or what the hour, the door is always open to him and his place in my home unquestioned and assured forever. You may have noted, too, that he never speaks. He is dumb.

"AFTER you left the United States for Egypt, I was deucedly down in the mouth. Not new for me, eh? But it was worse than ever with you gone. Nothing seemed to go right. Not that anything ever had. But then, I was always expecting it to, and your companionship had always helped me to keep my own faith. I got moody when I didn't have you to spill all my grief to any more. I took to going out by myself for long walks in the woods. I didn't know then what was directing me. I do now. So will you before I'm done talking.

"The way I went habitually led down an old road winding off into the trees and seemingly going nowhere. Every time I went I followed it a little farther. And I came finally one day to a clearing in the depth of the forest, surrounding an old deserted house. I stopped short in surprize. You know how old deserted

houses have always held a fascination for me. I stood and stared at this one. It was an ancient building, almost covered with vines, half hidden under huge old elm trees. But it was still in a fair state of preservation, although I could see it had been abandoned for a long time. Its doors and windows were still intact, and not a pane was broken.

"There was an air of mystery about it. Perhaps there is always that about deserted houses. I guess there is. But there was a different tone here. The mystery in the air was sinister, warning. I didn't just like it. Yet I was drawn to it. I stood there trying to analyze that sinister atmosphere. It was so powerful as to be almost tangible. It seemed to pervade even the trees. Then I noted an odd thing. The place lacked that shroud of mold, of disintegration and decay that seems indigenous to abandoned habitations. Everything was flourishing there.

"The trees were monstrous, healthy and green. The weeds and grass that had claimed the clearing, had grown wildly over everything, were virile, alive. There could never have been flowers in that place, for there were none left to tell the tale, and they couldn't have died there. You couldn't imagine anything *dying* there. Nothing was tumbled down but the old picket fence enclosing house, yard and elms. Nothing was out of place but the old gate dragging in the rank weeds on one rusty hinge.

"Drawn by something irresistible—curiosity, interest; call it what you will, it was stronger than I was—I turned in the gate and approached the house. I went up on the porch and tried the front door. It was locked. I tried the two front windows. They were locked also. I descended from the porch and started around the house, making my way with difficulty through the grass and wild vines. Every window and door

opening into the house was locked, and I could see nothing of the interior through the thick folds of the curtains drawn close across the windows and the dusty panes.

"I decided I might as well leave with my curiosity unsatisfied, and turned to go, when I noticed an odd enclosure in the yard quite a way to the rear of the house. It, too, was surrounded by a picket fence, but this fence was in better repair than the other. It was plain to be seen that it had been put up years later than the fence surrounding the yard. The space it enclosed was perhaps eight by ten feet, and was hidden from me at that distance by brush and vines.

"My interest aroused afresh, I walked toward it. And when I reached that fence I stopped a good deal shorter than I had done when I first sighted the house, for squarely in the center of that enclosure was a grave. It had been there a long time, and I couldn't help thinking to myself that it seemed decidedly out of place. It simply wasn't conceivable that *anything* should die there. Yet, there was the grave. The earth was sunken in on top, and the plain granite headstone was stained and covered with moss. I could see there was some kind of inscription on the stone, but the moss rendered it illegible. The gate in this fence hung squarely. I passed through it, leaned over the stone and scraped the moss away. I read this:

Here lies the body of Lona Bennares.  
Nobody knows and nobody cares.

"That inscription itself was odd enough to arrest attention. But still more arresting was the fact that the two lines had not been placed there by the same hand. The first line was in script, beautifully chiseled by expert fingers. The second line had been crudely printed, and had been done with some blunt and unsuitable instrument. I scraped the moss from the entire face of the stone, but noth-

ing else was there. No date—nothing. Only those two strange lines. I stood there puzzling over it for a long time. But conjecture was useless. I could make nothing of it, of course, and I turned for the second time to go away. But as I rounded the corner of the house I halted in my tracks.

"Somebody was coming in the front gate. It was the man in the green coat. He saw me standing there, gave me a sharp, scrutinizing look, as though he were measuring me, then averted his eyes and walked up the steps to the front porch. He took a key from his pocket, unlocked the door and went in, leaving it open behind him. Actuated by a curiosity whose control was far beyond my capacity, I followed him up the steps and peered through the door at him.

"To my astonishment the house was fully furnished. Carpets on the floor and pictures on the walls were exactly now as they had been left. The chairs scattered about were in the careless array of chairs lately used. Yet dust was over everything. It was a long time since anyone had lived there. The thought struck me that the whole place had the look of having been forsaken hurriedly, at the instigation of some compelling impulse—or fear. I wondered if the house and grounds belonged to the man in the green coat. He certainly acted as though they did.

"He must have known I was watching him, I thought, but he paid no attention to me. He had removed some small books from his pocket. Note-books they were. He selected from them one with a mottled gray cover, and went to an old desk in a corner of the room. He opened the desk, removed some faded papers from its central drawer, sat down at the table by the window and began to compare the papers with notes in the gray book. He was after some specific thing, and it didn't take him long to find it. He gave a little nod

of satisfaction, got to his feet, replaced the papers in the desk, closed it and thrust the note-book back into his pocket with the others. Then he came briskly toward the door.

"I made no attempt to conceal myself. I wanted him to see me. I wanted to force him to speak to me. I stepped aside as he emerged from the house and paused to lock the door behind him. He glanced at me but made no offer to speak. My curiosity had me in a strangle-hold by this time, and I wasn't going to let him get away from me so easily.

"How do you do?" I said politely.

"Without looking at me, he pulled one of the books from his pocket, tore out a page, scribbled something on it, thrust the paper abruptly into my hand and hurried down the steps. Completely mystified and astonished, I looked at the sheet of note-paper. On it he had written, 'I am dumb. How do you do?'

"In spite of myself I grinned. Evidently my presence there was of no concern to him. I chuckled as I crumpled the paper in my hand and thrust it into my pocket. But I was enormously curious still, and I knew that my curiosity would never let me rest until I learned what important notes the man in the green coat kept hidden in that old desk in that deserted house out in the trees, miles from anywhere. I turned to glance after the man in the green coat. He was just disappearing down the old road beyond the picket fence.

"WITH a sneaking feeling of meddling in something that was none of my business, I decided to go to the nearest village and see what I could find out about that forsaken house and the man in the green coat. I lost no time in getting there. There is always one man in a small village who is very apt to know more about everybody in the village than they themselves know—the postmaster.

Acting on that premise I headed for the dinky post-office, housed in a little one-story frame building down the main street. Besides being the post-office, it was drug store, candy store and grocery store combined, and it was presided over by a tall, lank individual with a cadaverous face and deep-set near-sighted eyes. He greeted me with the curiosity and interest a stranger is accorded in a small village and asked me what I would have. I said I was hungry from a long walk, which was pretty much the truth, and would take some cheese and crackers and eat them there if he didn't mind. He was loquacious enough, and was only too glad to have someone about whom he could talk to a standstill.

"I mentioned casually that it was just possible I might buy a place in the village and come to live there—if I found the villagers to my fancy. That was enough to launch him into the family history of every inhabitant, save one. He did not mention anyone by the name of Bennares. I had to get him started in that direction somehow, so I said I had been hiking about over the countryside to see how it would suit me. From which it was easy to lead up to the deserted house in the woods.

"The postmaster glanced at me with a slightly startled expression, then he said rather shortly, 'That's a pretty good place to stay away from, Mister. You couldn't hire a soul in this town to set foot in that yard. That place was owned by Sam Bennares some years ago, and still is for all I know. I'm certain nobody else wants it. Sam deserted it after his girl Lona died.'

"He halted a moment, as though not having any intention to let his tongue run away with him. He shot me a shrewd, appraising glance, as though wondering how much he'd better tell. I asked him half jestingly if the place was haunted. That

fired his pride in what was perhaps the village's one authentic legend. He answered darkly, trying to be very mysterious.

"It's haunted, right enough, but not by the spirit of Lona Bennares. By another kind of spirit, Mister. The spirit of something hidden and ugly. Lona died under funny circumstances."

"He halted again, and after waiting patiently for a moment, I prodded him on.

"Yes? How so?" I asked. "What was the cause of her death?"

"That's what nobody knows." The postmaster scowled and leaned toward me confidentially. "There was something mysterious and secretive about it, Mister. Sam was a doctor, and it was him that tended her and him what signed the death report. She died uncommon sudden, that's what. One day we seen her here on the street as live as anybody, and the next day she was dead. Sam give out her funeral notice, but he kept the coffin closed and wouldn't let nobody see the body. Then, instead of burying her in the churchyard by her mother as was right and proper, he got a permit and buried her in his own back yard. There wasn't a thing to which we could rightly point a finger and lay no suspicion of foul work on anybody.

"But all of us begun to remember queer things. We remembered that for the last week or two Lona had acted like she was scared of something. And we remembered, too, that when she was in town the day before she died she wasn't ailing. No sir, not none. She was just as well as she'd ever been. Sam put up a picket fence around her grave. Next thing we knew, Sam was gone. And he never come back, only once a year. Folks think he comes to visit the grave, that there's something on his conscience. He never has nothing to say to anybody, and he always goes right away again. He ain't showed

up lately, though. Not for about three years.'

"Yes, I think I've seen him,' I put in. 'He wears a bright green coat, doesn't he?'

"No.' The postmaster stared at me, an odd look in his near-sighted eyes. 'So you seen *him*, eh, Mister? H'm, he's as bad as Sam. The fellow that wears the green coat is an inventor, an old crony of Sam's. Awful queer fellow he is. He lived there with Sam for about a year before Lona died so sudden. Folks always thought he was pretty much in love with Lona, but he was ugly as sin and you couldn't imagine her as fancying the man in the green coat. Lona was right pretty. When Sam went away, the fellow in the green coat went with him. Folks have seen him around these parts once in every few months ever since. But what him and Sam find so interesting around that old house, unless it's Lona's grave, is more than anybody can figure.

"I'm telling you, Mister, there's something mighty queer about the whole business. If one of them two men didn't have something to do with Lona's death, I'm a poor guesser. One of them made away with her, that's what everybody thinks. But they's no way to prove it. Look here, Mister. If that girl died all right and proper, and they wasn't nothing ugly about it, why wouldn't Sam open the coffin? Why wouldn't he let nobody see her? And if he had any good reason for not letting nobody see her, why didn't he come out with it? But, no, sir, nothing like that. Sam just refused to let anybody look at the body and shut up like a clam, and he looked so funny and mad-like that everybody was afraid to ask him any questions. Even I was. And I'm mighty cur'us, Mister. When I'm afraid to ask anybody questions, you can bet there's something wrong.'



“‘Yes, I imagine so.’ I returned dryly. ‘It certainly does look as though you had a real first-class mystery here. But if I decide to buy in the village, I assure you your mystery will not deter me in the least.’

“I had finished my crackers and cheese. I had gotten from the postmaster about all the information I was likely to get, so I bade him good-bye and took my leave.

“**Y**ou can easily see that my curiosity, already uncomfortably active, would now be rendered almost unbearable. I simply had to find out why those two men kept coming back to that old house, and what they were after. And, if possible, which of them had killed the girl, if the postmaster was right in his sinister insinuation. I watched the house in the woods for several days, intending to spy upon the man in the green coat and follow him into the house. I had no idea what I would do when I got there. I was simply determined to get into that house. But the man in the green coat did not reappear, and I couldn’t stand it any longer. I took a bunch of pass keys and tried the front door. To my surprise, though I don’t know why I should have been surprized, I had no trouble turning the lock.

“I entered the house, locked the door behind me and went directly to the old desk. I knew exactly which drawer he had opened, and I pulled it out. There lay the papers which the man in the green coat had been comparing in his note-book. I picked them up with a good deal of eagerness.

“What do you think I found, Grant? You’d never guess in a million years. I found a formula for transmuting all base metal to gold—everything from lead to steel. I read it over carefully. It was written in a stilted hand, and it did not bear the name of any person. But it was

easily legible, and I studied it minutely with growing interest. So this was the thing that brought those two men back to the old house so persistently. Had it anything to do with the strange death of Lona Bennes? I decided right then and there to determine just what value the formula had; I copied it in a note-book of my own, replaced the papers in the desk drawer exactly as I had found them, and let myself out of the house.

“For the next two weeks I spent every waking minute experimenting with that formula. I tried it on a half-dozen metals, but the result was always the same. It transmuted the metal all right, to some strange composition infinitely finer, of a dirty greenish yellow—but not to gold. Then, unexpectedly, what little gray matter I have got on the job and I saw what was wrong. The formula lacked one important ingredient. I sat in my chair scowling at it, wondering if there were some other copy of that formula more complete. Perhaps all the formula papers worked out by the man in the green coat were not in that one drawer. I kicked myself for an ass, for not going through the whole desk, but I consoled myself with the knowledge that I could easily enough go back to the house the next day.

“And I guess I don’t need to tell you that I was there as soon as it became daylight. I searched that old desk from top to bottom, but there were no other papers in it concerning the formula. I slammed all the drawers shut, peevishly, and stood there scowling at the old desk, wondering if that one lacking ingredient was hidden somewhere in the house. If so, was that the thing the two men were trying to find? Which one of them hid it, and which knew where it was? Or had the man who had hidden it forgotten where he put it?

“I started at the plausibility of a sudden thought. Maybe it was the

girl who had hidden it. The postmaster said the ugly little inventor had been in love with her, and that she was right pretty. I could picture her rather easily. A light-headed, vain little small-town belle, who might find the attention of the man in the green coat very obnoxious. I could picture her spying upon the inventor, and upon her father who inevitably would have become interested in the marvelous formula concocted by his old crony. I could see her gloating over the discovery of that one important ingredient which the inventor doubtlessly had omitted purposely from the written formula. His reason for omitting it would be very clear. He was taking no chances of anyone's stealing that formula, not even trusting his old friend and host.

"I could see Sam Bennares spying, too, trying to discover where the man in the green coat kept notes on that missing ingredient. I visioned the girl locating its hiding-place, and changing the notes to some place she alone knew, then by a sly word here and there setting the two men at each other, causing the inventor to suspect that her father had stolen the notes, egging her father to indignant denial. And her motives, also, would be very clear. A right pretty small-town belle would go farther than that to engineer a quarrel between the two men, inveigle her father into ordering the inventor out of his house, and so rid herself of the presence of a man whose attentions were offensive to her. And it might very well have been that she had failed in her design, drawn their combined anger down on herself, and paid for her meddling with her life.

"Having settled this in my own mind as being a very reasonable hypothesis, I began trying to conjecture as to what would be the most likely place for the girl herself to hide the notes. But there I was baffled. My understanding of women

was precisely nil. About the only thing I could do was search the entire house. I had just decided to give the whole day to that search, and began it immediately, when I heard the door open behind me.

"Startled, I whirled to face the door. There stood the man in the green coat.

"**O**DDLY enough, he did not seem at all surprized to find me there. He smiled slightly, that strange smile that so lights his ugly face, and I had an uncomfortable feeling that he had been spying upon me. That he had known I was there all the time. I'll go farther than that. I felt that for some obscure reason he had been waiting and watching, hoping that my curiosity would bring me back there.

"He stood and eyed me for a moment, then abruptly advanced to the table. Then, while I stood staring at him inanely, he took out one of his note-books, rapidly scribbled something on a page, tore out the page, laid it on the table, turned around and walked out of the house. I stood gazing after him, wondering what the deuce he was up to, then stepped over to the table and looked at the scribbled message. And I felt my eyes nearly pop out of my head. This is what he had written:

Lona Bennares is not dead. Buried in that grave is a hundred thousand dollars gold, transmuted from lead. Leave it alone. Lona was put out of the way by her father. The story is too long to tell here. I have been waiting and watching for someone like you. If you will seek Lona out, and free her from her living death in the asylum at Wentworth, I will give you the complete formula for transmuting base metal to gold. You will thereby become wealthy, with an absolutely unlimited supply, and at your death will add to the world's scientific discoveries. I must request that you keep the formula secret as long as you live. Too common knowledge of it would be disastrous. No answer is necessary. I will be watching to see what you do.

"Well, you may be able to imagine faintly how I felt. If the queer old

inventor had told the truth, I was a mile off in my hypothesis. If there was a hundred thousand dollars worth of transmuted gold in that grave, no wonder both of the two men kept watch of that house. But why in the devil did Bennares go to such extremes to make it appear that the girl had died, to put her out of the way and bury that gold, representing it as her body? And why did the inventor let him get away with it? And why should he want to put the girl out of the way, anyhow? The mysterious muddle was getting worse every minute, and I decided to waste no more time in vague hypotheses. I began to wonder what I was going to do about that note.

"I read it again and roamed about the room scowling and thinking it over. For a moment, I will admit, I toyed with the idea of digging that hundred thousand dollars out of that grave and ducking out of the country, but on second thought was ashamed of myself for it. If the queer old crank in the green coat was telling the truth, and if he really had completed and proved that formula, and if he would keep his word and turn it over to me for merely finding some way of releasing the girl, there was no question as to the course I should pursue. *If!* But what the devil would he do with the girl, granted that she was in the asylum, alive and well, and I could succeed in getting her out? That, however, was none of my business. But if he really had such a formula, why pass it on to me? Of course, he would have it, too, and he demanded that I keep it secret. I figured he must think a lot of that girl.

"Well, of course, it was inevitable that I should take him up. The prospect of owning that formula, of reaching all in a breath my lifelong desire, was too great a temptation. I got out of there, carrying the note in my pocket, and seeing that the house was securely locked behind me.

"WENTWORTH was little less than a hundred miles away. I was there before noon the next day. I went directly to the asylum, representing myself as a visitor, but admitting confidentially to the superintendent that I was looking for an old friend who had disappeared seven years ago. Lona Bennares had been 'dead' for seven years. The superintendent told me he had but three inmates who had been there that exact length of time, two women and a man. The man wasn't to be considered, and the first of the two women to which he took me was immediately eliminated by her white hair and seventy years of age. The moment I laid eyes on the other woman, I began to put some credence in what had been said by the man in the green coat. I thought of what the postmaster had said—that she was a right pretty girl. I would have liked to knock him down. And yet she was exactly the type that would be so designated by a small-town fellow with no standards by which to judge.

"I suppose that nothing short of yellow hair, doll features and china blue eyes could have appealed to him as beauty. Who could have expected him to realize any proper appreciation of her tall, erect, goddesslike figure? Of her high-bred, medieval features? Features that, with the high rounded forehead, deep-set black eyes, slender Roman nose, finely curved mouth and pointed chin above the long, slim neck, would have driven Raphael post-haste to his palette and brushes. No wonder the man in the green coat had been mad about her. He, at least, was not without standards. But I looked in her face, and temporarily I was as dumb as the inventor. What should I say to her, and how should I begin? The superintendent addressed her as Miss Jane, and told her that I was merely one of their infrequent visitors. She looked at me intently, holding

herself in a kind of calm dignity and with an inscrutable expression worthy of the Mona Lisa. But very clearly in her eyes I saw a sadness, a deep, settled despair. Whether or not she was Lona Bennares, she was obviously a very beautiful woman of about my own age, without hope, without desire to live. The resignation mingling with the despair in her deep eyes vouched for the fact that rebellion had long since withered and died within her.

"I turned abruptly to the superintendent and asked to be allowed to talk to her alone. He hemmed and hawed a bit, stared first at her, then at me, protested that it was somewhat irregular, but finally acceded grudgingly to my request. He said, as though to warn me that any collusion with her would be impossible, that she was dumb, and could answer no questions I might intend to ask her. Then he went out and left me alone with her. Dumb—dumb! Why was everybody dumb? She stood looking at me with a slight expectancy, and I was fudging around for some diplomatic opening. But I could find none.

"Finally I blurted out, baldly: 'Are you Lona Bennares?'

"There was no perceptible change of expression on her face, but I felt that something moved in her eyes. I stepped closer to her and lowered my voice.

" 'Listen,' I said. 'I am here as a friend. I had not heard that you were dumb. Are you?'

"Still there was no change of expression. The black eyes stared back at me unwinking. But now I was certain of the expectancy there, and it was growing. I went on swiftly.

" 'If you are Lona Bennares, and can signal to me, and will do so, in answer to my questions, it may be that I can get you out of here,' I said. 'I have not come impelled in any way by curiosity, nor with the intent to meddle in your affairs. I come only to be of assistance, if that assistance

is desired. I was sent by the man in the green coat.'

"And then indeed did her expression change, so suddenly that it startled me. Her eyes widened, incredulously, mirroring an unmistakable flash of fear. She backed from me abruptly, staring, then suddenly dropped into the one chair in that cell-like room, and burst into tears.

"I was utterly nonplussed. Had I done the wrong thing in mentioning him? That swift fear in her eyes was a thing about which there could be no doubt. I wondered, with a startled sense of uneasiness, if it were the man in the green coat who was responsible for her being here. Yet if that were so, what was it that drove him now to seeking her release? And I pondered over something that had puzzled me before. Why didn't he try to accomplish her release himself? But I had no time to be standing there wasting precious moments in hopeless conjecture. I knew well enough that the superintendent would not leave me alone with her any too long. So I stepped closer and ventured to lay a sympathetic hand on her shoulder.

" 'Please listen,' I urged, striving to draw her attention. 'What is it you fear? I will be frank with you. I realize I am an utter stranger, but you have no cause to doubt my motives in seeking you out. I repeat, I come as a friend. I don't know any too much about this affair myself, but I will tell you what I do know, since I believe it is your right. I happened to make the acquaintance of the man in the green coat. He told me about you, and claimed that your father had put you here to get you out of the way. He offered me a pretty big reward if I would come here and get you out. That is all there is to it. I am here. I know nothing more, nor do I need to know. If you are unjustly incarcerated in this place, any man with a grain of

humanity would do his utmost to secure your release, reward or no reward. As a matter of fact, having been of service to you would be reward enough. There, I have laid my cards on the table. I can do nothing more unless you choose to co-operate with me.'

"She had controlled her tears, but that was the only change in her attitude. She still sat with her head bowed in her hands, not paying the least attention to the touch of my fingers on her shoulder. Feeling uneasy, baffled, I dropped my hand, stepped back a pace and stood looking down at her.

"Was it possible after all that she was mad? Was the man in the green coat mad? Was I mad? Was the whole world mad? I began to suspect it. Yet hers were not the eyes of a mad woman. I frowned, annoyed at the time that was passing, wondering what step to take next. Then she suddenly raised her head and looked at me. No, those were not the eyes of a mad woman. Many expressions mingled there for me to read. Confusion, wonder, grief, hope, suspicion and fear—but not madness. And then to my utter astonishment she spoke.

"'No, I am not dumb—any more. I *am* Lona Bennares, yes. I am not known here by that name. Lona Bennares is dead.' She halted there, with a grimace of bitterness, then asked abruptly: 'When and where did you see the man in the green coat?'

"All doubt of that man had left me the moment she spoke. Whatever his motives in wanting her released, whether they were selfish or altruistic, he had told me the truth concerning her whereabouts, and I had a swift intuition that he had told me the truth all the way. I stepped closer to her again, and my blood hammered in my heart. Oh yes, I was gone, all right. Head over heels. Had been from the moment I stepped

in the doorway of her cell-like room and looked in her face. I answered her question eagerly.

"'I saw him yesterday, in the old deserted house where you used to live. I stumbled on the place several days ago, and saw him going in there. I also saw him comparing notes in a book he carried in his pocket to some papers in that old desk in the front room. That aroused my curiosity. I went back to the house, got in with a pass key and looked at those papers. You'll know what I found. I'll admit I was wildly excited about it. I copied the formula and tried it out, but it lacked one important ingredient, as you must also know. I went back there again to see if he had left any notes containing that ingredient. He came in while I was there, wrote this note, left it on the table, and walked out.'

"The strange fear in her eyes grew, wavered and grew again as I talked. As I withdrew the note from my pocket, unfolded it and handed it to her, she cried out strangely, and shuddered even as she accepted it. Then her eyes glued to it, unbelieving, and she looked up at me with an incredulous stare as she returned it and spoke.

"'Yes, I believe you. I *must* believe you. I don't understand. But that is unquestionably his handwriting. This is a terrible place for a sane woman. I wonder at myself that I *am* sane after everything that has happened. The superintendent will be back any minute. I must talk quickly. My father and the man in the green coat quarreled over the formula. Father wanted it. The inventor would not give it to him. He said it would not be good for him, that he was not a big enough man to handle it. They came to blows. Father proved that he would stop at nothing to get the formula. When I was asleep, he injected into my veins some strange fluid that would render me dumb for five or six years. Then

he brought me here. He represented me as his sister, and placed me here under the name of Jane Allen. Then he devoted all his time in an effort to procure that full formula. Two years ago he was found dead in his laboratory. News of it reached me, and I gave up all hope of ever leaving this place. There is much more I could tell you. There is neither time to do so now, nor wisdom *in* doing so.'

"Your father rendered you dumb by the use of something injected into your veins?' I interrupted, struck with a sudden thought. 'Then—was the man in the green coat—?'

"Yes,' she interrupted in turn. 'He was made dumb by the same process. He refused to give my father the name of the missing ingredient, to *tell* him, I should say, since he had never written it down. And my father injected into his veins that hideous fluid. I fear—I fear that my father must have become something of a fiend, mentally unbalanced by the visions of what that formula could bring a man. He could regulate the period of dumbness he inflicted by the strength of the injection. He only intended making me dumb for a few years, but I heard him tell the man in the green coat that he was making him dumb forever. He said that if he would not tell him that missing ingredient, he would see that no other man ever got it. The man in the green coat had taken a vow never to write it down.'

**S**HE ceased speaking, and I stood lost in thought for a moment. If he was rendered dumb forever, the man in the green coat would be compelled to break his vow and write that ingredient's name down for me. Or had he some idea whereby he hoped to break that long silence of his? That passed through my head more in a sense of detached curiosity than anything else.

"I was on the point of speaking to her again, when I heard the superin-

endent returning. I said, hastily, under my breath, 'Trust me, Miss Bennares, if you can trust a stranger after those nearest to you have treated you so inhumanly. I haven't time to say more. I shall go straight to the man in the green coat, and see what he has to suggest. I'll see you again as soon as possible.' Then I heard the steps drawing nearer, and I raised my voice to a casual, perfunctory remark. 'I'm sorry you can't speak, Miss. But I guess you wouldn't know anything about my friend, anyway. I fancy you wouldn't remember.'

"She remembers nothing,' the superintendent put in, suavely, with something of satisfaction on his face. 'I told you it would do no good to talk to her. If you care to come along with me, we have a very interesting case down the hall a few doors.'

"I wanted to tell him that I wasn't interested in anything else in the world right then but Lona Bennares, and I wanted to knock his impudent tongue down his throat. But I had to keep my mouth shut and follow him out of there, knowing that Lona's eyes were following me, half frantically, afraid to hope, desperately trying to keep herself from hopping. Once down the hall with him, I studied him and tried to estimate the likeliest way of reaching him. He was inclined to be suspicious of everyone, which might have been natural to a man in his place. I don't know. But he was also one of those men whose vanity is rather easily touched. And when he asked me if he hadn't called the turn about the uselessness of talking to Lona, I lied like a trooper.

"Yes, you certainly did,' I admitted, and I didn't have to dissemble in putting on a long face, either. I felt gloomy enough inside. 'She doesn't know me at all—showed not the least sign of recognizing me. So I pretended to be looking for some-

one else, to avoid exciting her. But she is the girl I was trying to find. We were to have been married, years ago. I left the United States on business, and when I came back she had disappeared. I've been looking for her ever since. I find her—here.'

" 'Well, now, I want to know!' He looked at my sympathetically, and waited to see what else I was going to say. I didn't leave him wondering long.

" 'Yes,' I said, with the idea of planting a few seeds where they would flourish and do the most good. But what I said now was true enough. 'It's very sad for me to find her this way, and sadder still to think of leaving her here. You're a man of discernment, you can see that. And I imagine you must be a man with a great deal of influence in the right quarters. Couldn't you use that influence to help me get her out and into my personal care?'

" 'No. No, sir, Mister, I can't. I'm sorry.' And I believe he really was. My flattery had hit home, exactly as I intended it should, and he thawed to me, his voice half apologetic as he went on in explanation. 'You see, it's like this. When her brother brought her here he seemed very much upset and grieved over her condition. He paid her keep here for six months, and came back once or twice to see her. The last time he came we had quite a long, confidential talk. I could see that merely the sight of her was too much for him. He told me he didn't think he could stand it to come back again. So he gave me a perfectly enormous sum of money, on the written agreement we were to care for her here until her death, and under no conditions allow anyone at any time to take her out. So you see, I am duty bound to fulfil my obligation. That Mr. Allen has since died in no way lessens my duty toward him or Miss Jane. But I *can* appreciate your

position. And I say again—I'm sorry.'

"Well, that was that. Old Sam Benares had certainly sewed the whole thing up. And he'd sewed it tight. It looked like a blank wall to me. I want to tell you, Grant, I packed a pretty heavy heart as I walked out of that asylum and headed back to the old deserted house to keep my rendezvous with the man in the green coat.

"As I half expected, he was waiting there for me when I arrived the next afternoon. And the expression of my face must have been rather glum, for he scrutinized me sharply, waved me to a chair, scribbled something on a paper and thrust it in front of my face. I read: 'Don't be so down-hearted. There's always some way out of everything. You've seen her. What did you find?'

" 'Yes,' I admitted calmly, rather wearily. 'I've seen her, and she admitted her identity to me. But apparently that's about all the good it'll ever do—just my having seen her.' And then I went on to recount to him, verbatim, all that had passed between Lona and me, and between the superintendent and me.

"**H**E LISTENED with a perfectly stoical face until I had finished. He had taken a chair facing me. And then he sprang to his feet and began pacing back and forth across the room, his face livid with rage. I watched him in silence, wondering if there were any possible way out for Lona. Then suddenly he turned and darted out of the room, into the rear of the house, and I heard him running pell-mell up the stairs to the rooms overhead. I heard him scurrying around up there, and very shortly he came tearing back down again at the same breakneck pace. He raced into the room and, before my wondering eyes, he planked down on the table a small bottle half filled with some milky brown fluid, and a

small hypodermic syringe. He pulled his indispensable note-book from his pocket, tore out a leaf, and began writing on it with feverish haste.

"I waited in silence, watching him; this time his message seemed rather lengthy. When it was finished he made no move to give it to me, but backed from the table, and stood perfectly motionless, his strange eyes darting back and forth from the note he had written to the objects on the table, and to me. After a long moment his gaze glued to mine, and if I ever saw desperation, hope and supplication in human eyes, I saw them then in his. He made a queer little half-threatening gesture, darted by me and rushed out of the house.

"I sat there and stared at that bottle and syringe like a fool, half afraid to go and see what he had written. But my eagerness and my own desperate desire for action were stronger than my fear. I got abruptly to my feet, stepped to the table and bent to read the note:

There is only one way out. She is right. Sam grew to be a terrible fiend. He was my friend, and I would have let him have the formula if he had been a bigger man, and if I hadn't known for what purpose he wanted unlimited wealth. He was dabbling in black magic; he had the house littered with potions and serums. Lona never knew what they were. Had I given him that formula I would have loosed a destroying fiend on the world. He is gone now, driven to a far plane, and held there by the reaction of his own dark sorcery. We can forget him. But some of his own evil knowledge may now be the thing that will make possible a solution for us to this tangle.

You have seen Lona, and your face tells me that you have loved her, even as I have done. She could never care for a hideous thing like me. Even my attempts at kindness were repellent to her. It seems irony now that it should rest solely upon me to release her from that horrible prison into which her fiend of a father put her. But all I ask of eternal life is to be allowed the privilege of doing that thing. And no reward is too great for the man who will aid me. If I could see her free, see her your contented and beloved wife, as I know

you are seeing her already in your imagination, I would be content.

Here, then, is what you must do. To get her out of there, we must have her die temporarily. In that bottle is a solution Sam distilled. Injected into the veins, it produces a coma that so closely simulates death that no physician can tell it from death. You must get to her secretly, inject this into her arm, and call the next day to see her. You will be told she is dead, and you must claim the body. But you must get her away quickly. She will wake from the coma in thirty-six hours. This is what remained of the same fluid Sam used to place her in a state of coma when he took her away. In the name of God, I ask you to act.

"I backed from the table with an involuntary shiver as I finished reading what had been written by the man in the green coat. I had to hold on to myself rigidly, that I might consider it sanely. I was repelled by it, yet I was touched by it, too. Touched by his devouring and hopeless passion for her, and his honest realization of his own repugnant appearance. I thought of his little dried-up body, his great mummylike head, his hard gray eyes and ugly features—and I thought of her. Yes, I could pity him. But it was going to take all the will-power I possessed to drive myself to do the thing he asked.

"And yet I knew it was the only way we should ever get her out of there; I knew now how utterly selfless was his motive toward her. Loving her as he did, he asked only to see her released from what must be torture to her sensitive spirit. To procure her release, he could contemplate seeing her the wife of another man, could even be contented at the sight. That, if I knew anything about it, was a brand of love to which I could take off my hat. I knew even as I stood there that I would do as he asked. But a thousand things ran through my mind and turned me cold as I contemplated it. Suppose the solution might be weakened or changed after standing all these years. Suppose it would



not send her into a coma. Suppose it would send her into a coma from which she would never wake. Even so, reason argued, eternal sleep would be infinitely better than the living death she now knew. Whatever the chances, ghastly as they were, I had no choice. It was the one way open to me, and I must take it.

"The next night, well after 11 o'clock, I stealthily approached the asylum. I blessed the crescent moon that gave me barely enough light to get my bearings, yet left enough of shadow to conceal me effectually, as I stood looking up at the grim building. It was entirely dark. Everyone within it was long since asleep. Fortune favored me in one thing. Her room was on the ground floor. When I had finally located it, I slipped warily up to the window and tapped on the bars. I dared not make too much noise. And I had about despaired of waking her when I finally heard a stir in the room, and saw her face gleaming whitely at me from within. The window was partly open, and I placed my mouth close to the bars as I spoke to her. When she saw it was I, I heard her give a little indrawn breath of relief. Rapidly I explained to her what had taken place, and what had been proposed by the man in the green coat. I added my plea to his, and told her then and there that I asked no greater privilege than to free her and make her my wife.

"For a long time she was silent, and I wondered what was going on in her mind. Then she abruptly slipped the window up a little farther, and held her arm close to the bars. It was I who caught my breath then. I've never been a coward, but it took all the courage I had to fill that needle with that unknown solution and raise it toward that white arm. The drive of the needle must have hurt her, but she gave no sign. And if I ever prayed in my life, I was certainly praying desperately as

I drove that plunger home. She gave a little gasp and backed from the window, and I turned and stumbled away like a blind man.

"I don't think I care to try to describe the rest of that night, Grant. In Peking there is an edifice called the Temple of Seventeen Hells. By the time morning came I think I could have told the Chinese how to build a temple of twice seventeen hells. I didn't know what I had done, nor how it would end. I was, still like a blind man, trusting desperately in the word of the man in the green coat.

"By daylight, my nerves in rags, I found myself pacing restlessly about in a grove perhaps a mile from the asylum. It was all I could do to control my fevered impatience, and the moments dragged like hours. Along near noon I turned my steps toward the asylum. When I presented myself, the moment I looked into the superintendent's face, I knew the desperate plan had succeeded in part at least. He sighed regretfully, greeting me before I had a chance to speak.

"'I have sad news for you, my friend,' he said. 'The young lady died very suddenly last night. She hadn't been ailing that we know of. The doctor says that her heart simply stopped.'

"I don't know how I retained enough of coherence to go ahead with things. Certainly I had no need to simulate shock and grief. I was feeling upset enough without any dissembling. And, barring a little red tape, I had no trouble in getting him to allow my claiming the body.

"There was no doubt in my mind as to where I should take her. To the old house, of course, till she revived and we could make plans for the immediate future. It was ghastly business for me, driving a closed car up to the side door, and with his aid carrying her out to the car. She was so cold and white, so utterly life-

less in appearance, that I was ridden by panic lest she should be really dead.

"I MANAGED somehow to exist through that long drive away from Wentworth to the old house in the woods. I drove steadily, but not too swiftly, and reached my destination along about 10 o'clock that evening. The man in the green coat was there waiting for me, with a single light burning and the shades drawn. I wish you could have seen the way his face lighted up when I carried her in and placed her on the old divan beyond the desk. He could not speak, and I had no desire to do so. There was nothing to be said, anyway. Each of us understood the other. Strangely—yet not so strangely after all, perhaps—I was beginning to feel a genuine affection for the queer little man in the green coat. In a tense, racking silence we sat there all night, guarding her and waiting. Daylight came, but still we sat there, unmoving. As the hours dragged by and noon approached, each moment seemed more unbearable than the last.

"The hands of my watch had just passed 12, when she stirred slightly and opened her eyes. She looked up at me, and then her gaze went on to the man in the green coat. She started, shrank back, and cried out.

"'You!' she gasped. Then her gaze darted to me. 'I don't even know your name,' she said to me. 'You forgot to tell me. But unless I'm very mad indeed, my prayers are answered and that awful nightmare is over. How can I ever be grateful enough to you?'

"'More to him than to me,' I answered, nodding to the ugly little man who was worshiping her with his eyes. 'If it hadn't been for him—'

"I didn't finish the sentence. But she knew what I meant. She winced;

her eyes traveled to him, and then back to me.

"Her next words were little more than a whisper. 'When you first came to me—oh, what is your name? How can I talk to you properly when I don't know your name?'

"I told her what it was. She thanked me and went on. 'As I started to say, Mr. Tobin, when you first came to me there and said he had sent you, I thought *you* were the mad one. But I guess I can sum it all up when I say I was so desperate that I would have taken any chance for release that presented itself, even when it came through a man who was mad.'

"'And that is why you were afraid?' I put in quickly, in a flash of enlightenment. She nodded soberly. 'But why,' I asked, 'should you think I was mad?'

"'Because—the man in the green coat is dead.' Her eyes were on him, wide and staring. 'My father killed him, in rage, because he would not give up the formula. It is his body that is buried out there in the yard, was buried there seven years ago.'

"She saw the shock and disbelief in my eyes and turned to him. 'Isn't it so?'

"He nodded.

"'Shall I tell him everything?' she asked, and he nodded again.

"'That was why my father put me away. He knew I was horrified, sickened by what he had done. He was afraid I'd tell. He rendered me dumb so I couldn't tell. Then he put me in the madhouse, where, if I attempted to write down what I knew, my keeper would only pity me and consider that I was where I belonged. Certainly had I attempted to write the truth it would have seemed mad enough to the average person. In the grave with him my father buried for safe keeping a large amount of gold made by the formula. He came back from time to time and carried it away, knowing well enough the villagers would stay away from here.

He gave a large part of it to the superintendent of the asylum to insure my being kept there. I think there is nothing more to tell.'

"And, Grant, there is little more for me to tell you. You have seen my wife. You know the position I have attained through my secret formula. You have seen him. You will understand now why my house is open to him no matter when he chooses to come, and no matter who is here."

As Tobin ceased speaking, Thorpe sat staring at him with horrified eyes. His blanched face and startled expression were evidence of the shock he had received as Tobin's story had drawn to a close. He drew a long breath, and shook his head, like a man who can in no wise credit what he has heard.

"Do you mean to tell me," he demanded, "that the man in the green coat, the man I saw here this evening, is a *ghost*?"

"You may call him what you will," Tobin answered quietly. "Ghost, disembodied spirit, or materialized astral being. I only know what I have told you. I only know that he has been dead for fifteen years—that he came back from beyond the grave, God knows at what cost—to pass on to me information that only he could give. I only know that he was the means of rescuing my wife from a living death. No matter who or what he is, he has shown me more than one priceless formula. He has shown me what ingredients it takes to make a noble man, a gentleman unafraid. And that's enough for me."

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