

The South-West Chamber

By Mary E. Wilkins-Freeman

ILLUSTRATED BY PETER NEWELL



THAT school-teacher from Acton is coming to-day," said Miss Sophia Gill. "I have decided to put her in the southwest chamber."

Amanda looked at her sister with an expression of mingled doubt and terror. "You don't suppose she would—" she began hesitatingly.

"Would what?" demanded Sophia sharply. Both were below the medium height and stout, but Sophia was firm where Amanda was flabby. Amanda wore a baggy old muslin (it was a hot day), and Sophia was uncompromisingly hooked up in a starched and boned cambric over her high shelving figure.

"I didn't know but she would object to sleeping in that room, as long as Aunt Harriet died there such a little while ago," faltered Amanda.

"Well," said Sophia, "of all the silly notions! If you are going to pick out rooms where nobody has died you'll have your hands full. I don't believe there's a room or a bed in this house that somebody hasn't passed away in."

"Well, I suppose I am silly to think of it, and she'd better go in there," said Amanda.

"I know she had. Now I guess you'd better go and see if any dust has settled on anything since it was cleaned, and open the west windows and let the sun in, while I see to that cake."

Amanda went to her task in the southwest chamber.

Nobody knew how this elderly woman with the untrammelled imagination of a child dreaded to enter the southwest chamber, and yet she could not have told why she

had the dread. She had occupied rooms which had been once tenanted by persons now dead. But this was different. She entered and her heart beat thickly in her ears. Her hands were cold. The room was a very large one. The four windows were closed, the blinds also. The room was in a film of green gloom. The furniture loomed out vaguely. The white counterpane on the bed showed like a blank page.

Amanda crossed the room, opened one of the windows, and threw back the blind. Then the room revealed itself an apartment full of an aged and worn, but no less valid state. Pieces of old mahogany swelled forth; a peacock-patterned chintz draped the bedstead. The closet door stood ajar. There was a glimpse of purple drapery floating from a peg inside. Amanda went across and took down the garment hanging there. She wondered how her sister had happened to leave it when she cleaned the room. It was an old loose gown which had belonged to her aunt. She took it down shuddering, and closed the closet door after a fearful glance into its dark depths. It was a long closet with a strong odor of lovage. Aunt Harriet had had a habit of eating lovage and had carried it constantly in her pocket.

Amanda received the odor with a start as if before an actual presence. She was always conscious of this fragrance of lovage as she tidied the room. She spread fresh towels over the wash-stand and the bureau; she made the bed. Then she thought to take the purple gown from the easy chair where she had just thrown it and carry it to the garret and put it in the trunk with the other articles of the dead woman's wardrobe which had been packed away

there; *but the purple gown was not on the chair!*

Amanda Gill was not a woman of strong convictions even as to her own actions. She directly thought that possibly she had been mistaken and had not removed it from the closet. She glanced at the closet door and saw with surprise that it was open, and she had thought she had closed it, but she instantly was not sure of that. So she entered the closet and looked for the purple gown. *It was not there!*

Amanda Gill went feebly out of the closet and looked at the easy chair again. The purple gown was not there! She looked wildly around the room. She went down on her trembling knees and peered under the bed, she opened the bureau drawers, she looked again in the closet. Then she stood in the middle of the floor and fairly wrung her hands.

There is a limit at which self-refutation must stop in any sane person. Amanda Gill had reached it. She knew that she had seen that purple gown in that closet; she knew that she had removed it and put it on the easy chair. She also knew that she had not taken it out of the room.

Then the thought occurred to her that possibly her sister Sophia might have entered the room unobserved while her back was turned and removed the dress. A sensation of relief came over her. Her blood seemed to flow back into its usual channels; the tension of her nerves relaxed.

"How silly I am!" she said aloud.

She hurried out and downstairs into the kitchen where Sophia was making cake, stirring with splendid circular sweeps of a wooden spoon a creamy yellow mass. Sophia looked up as her sister entered.

"Have you got it done?" said she.

"Yes," replied Amanda. Then she hesitated. A sudden terror overcame her. It did not seem as if it were at all probable that Sophia had left that foamy cake mixture a second to go to Aunt Harriet's chamber and remove that purple gown.

"Did you come up in Aunt Harriet's room while I was there?" she asked weakly.

"Of course I didn't. Why?"

"Nothing," replied Amanda.

Suddenly she realized that she could not tell her sister what had happened. She knew what Sophia would say if she told her. She dropped into a chair and began shelling the beans with nerveless fingers.

For the next hour or two the women were very busy. They kept no servant. When they had come into possession of this fine old place by the death of their aunt it had seemed a doubtful blessing. There was not a cent with which to pay for repairs and taxes and insurance. There had been a division in the old Ackley family years before. One of the daughters had married against her mother's wish, and had been disinherited. She had married a poor man by the name of Gill, and shared his humble lot in sight of her former home and her sister and mother living in prosperity, until she had borne three daughters; then she died, worn out with overwork and worry.

The mother and the elder sister had been pitiless to the last. Neither had ever spoken to her since she left her home the night of her marriage. They were hard women.

The three daughters of the disinherited sister had lived quiet and poor but not actually needy lives. Jane, the middle daughter, had married, and died in less than a year. Amanda and Sophia had taken the girl baby she left when the father married again. Sophia had taught a primary school for many years; she had saved enough to buy the little house in which they lived. Amanda had crocheted lace, and embroidered flannel, and made tidies and pincushions, and now in their late middle life had come the death of the aunt to whom they had never spoken, although they had often seen her, who had lived in solitary state in the old Ackley mansion until she was more than eighty. There had been no will, and they were the only heirs, with the exception of young Flora Scott, the daughter of the dead sister.

Sophia had promptly decided what was to be done. The small house was to be sold, and they were to move into the old Ackley house and take boarders to pay for its keeping. She scouted the idea of selling it. She had an enormous family pride.

Sophia and Amanda Gill had been living in the old Ackley house a fortnight, and they had three boarders: an elderly widow with a comfortable income, a young Congregationalist clergyman, and the middle-aged single woman who had charge of the village library. Now the school-teacher from Acton, Miss Louisa Stark, was expected for the summer.

Flora, their niece, was a very gentle girl, rather pretty, with large, serious blue eyes, a

seldom smiling mouth, and smooth flaxen hair. She was delicate and very young—sixteen on her next birthday.

She came home soon now with her parcels of sugar and tea from the grocer's. She entered the kitchen gravely and deposited them on the table by which her Aunt Amanda was seated stringing beans. Flora wore an obsolete turban-shaped hat of black straw which had belonged to the dead aunt; it set high like a crown, revealing her forehead. Her dress was an ancient purple-and-white print, too long and too large, except over the chest, where it held her like a straight waistcoat.

"Flora," said Sophia, "you go up to the room that was your Greataunt Harriet's and take the water-pitcher off the wash-stand and fill it with water."

"In *that* chamber?" asked Flora. Her face changed a little.

"Yes, in that chamber," returned her Aunt Sophia sharply. "Go right along."

Flora went. Very soon she returned with the blue-and-white water-pitcher and filled it carefully at the kitchen sink.

"Now be careful and not spill it," said Sophia as she went out of the room carrying it gingerly.

Then the village stage-coach was seen driving round to the front of the house. The house stood on a corner.

"Here, Amanda, you look better than I do, you go and meet her," said Sophia. "Show her right up to her room."

Amanda removed her apron hastily and obeyed. Sophia hurried with her cake. She had just put it in the oven, when the door opened and Flora entered carrying the blue water-pitcher.

"What are you bringing down that pitcher again for?" asked Sophia.

"She wants some water, and Aunt Amanda sent me," replied Flora.

"For the land sake! She hasn't used all that great pitcher full of water so quick?"

"There wasn't any water in it," replied Flora.

Her high, childish forehead was contracted slightly with a puzzled frown as she looked at her aunt.

"Didn't I see you filling the pitcher with water not ten minutes ago, I want to know?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Let me see that pitcher." Sophia examined the pitcher. It was not only perfectly dry from top to bottom, but even a little

dusty. She turned severely on the young girl. "That shows," said she, "you did not fill the pitcher at all. You let the water run at the side because you didn't want to carry it upstairs. I am ashamed of you. It's bad enough to be lazy, but when it comes to not telling the truth!"

The young girl's face broke up suddenly into piteous confusion and her blue eyes became filmy with tears.

"I did fill the pitcher, honest," she faltered. "You ask Aunt Amanda."

"I'll ask nobody. The pitcher is proof enough. Water don't go off and leave the pitcher dusty on the inside if it was put in ten minutes ago. Now you fill that pitcher quick, and carry it upstairs, and if you spill a drop there'll be something besides talk."

Flora filled the pitcher, with the tears falling over her cheeks. She snivelled softly as she went out, balancing it carefully against her slender hip. Sophia followed her up the stairs to the chamber where Miss Louisa Stark was waiting for the water to remove the soil of travel.

Louisa Stark was stout and solidly built. She was a masterly woman inured to command from years of school-teaching. She carried her swelling bulk with majesty; even her face, moist and red with the heat, lost nothing of its dignity of expression.

She was standing in the middle of the floor with an air which gave the effect of her standing upon an elevation. She turned when Sophia and Flora, carrying the water-pitcher, entered.

"This is my sister Sophia," said Amanda, tremulously.

Sophia advanced, shook hands with Miss Louisa Stark and bade her welcome and hoped she would like her room. Then she moved toward the closet. "There is a nice large closet in this room——" she said, then she stopped short.

The closet door was ajar, and a purple garment seemed suddenly to swing into view as if impelled by some wind.

"Why, here is something left in this closet," Sophia said in a mortified tone.

She pulled down the garment with a jerk, and as she did so Amanda passed her in a weak rush for the door.

"I am afraid your sister is not well," said the school-teacher from Acton. "She may be going to faint."

"She is not subject to fainting spells," replied Sophia, but she followed Amanda.

She found her in the room which they occupied together, lying on the bed, very pale and gasping. She leaned over her.

"Amanda, what is the matter? Don't you feel well?" she asked.

"I feel a little faint."

Sophia got a camphor bottle and began rubbing her sister's forehead.

"Do you feel better?" she asked.

Amanda nodded.

"I guess if you feel better I'll just get that dress of Aunt Harriet's and take it up garret."

Sophia hurried out, but soon returned.

"I want to know," she said, looking sharply and quickly around, "if I brought that purple dress in here? It isn't in that chamber, nor the closet. You aren't lying on it, are you?"

"I lay down before you came in," replied Amanda.

"So you did. Well, I'll go and look again."

Presently Amanda heard her sister's heavy step on the garret stairs. Then she returned with a queer defiant expression on her face.

"I carried it up garret after all and put it in the trunk," said she. "I declare, I forgot it. I suppose your being faint sort of put it out of my head."

Sophia's mouth was set; her eyes upon her sister's scared, agitated face were full of hard challenge.

"I must go right down and see to that cake," said she, going out of the room. "If you don't feel well, you pound on the floor with the umbrella."

Amanda looked after her. She knew that Sophia had not put that purple dress of her dead Aunt Harriet's in the trunk in the garret.

Meantime Miss Louisa Stark was settling herself in the southwest chamber. She unpacked her trunk and hung her dresses carefully in the closet. She was a very punctilious woman. She put on a black India silk dress with purple flowers. She pinned her lace at her throat with a brooch, very handsome, although somewhat obsolete—a bunch of pearl grapes on black onyx, set in gold filagree.

As she surveyed herself in the little swing-mirror surmounting the old-fashioned mahogany bureau she suddenly bent forward and looked closely at the brooch. Instead of the familiar bunch of pearl grapes on the black onyx, she saw a knot of blond-and-black

hair under glass surrounded by a border of twisted gold. She felt a thrill of horror. She unpinned the brooch, and it was her own familiar one, the pearl grapes and the onyx. "How very foolish I am," she thought. She thrust the pin in the lace at her throat, and again looked at herself in the glass, and there it was again—the knot of blond-and-black hair and twisted gold.

Louisa Stark looked at her own large, firm face above the brooch and it was full of terror and dismay which were new to it. She straightway began to wonder if there could be anything wrong with her mind. She remembered that an aunt of her mother's had been insane. A sort of fury with herself possessed her. She stared at the brooch in the glass with eyes at once angry and terrified. Then she removed it again and there was her own old brooch. Finally she thrust the gold pin through the lace again, fastened it, and, turning a defiant back on the glass, went down to supper.

At the supper table she met the other boarders. She viewed the elderly widow with reserve, the clergyman with respect, the middle-aged librarian with suspicion. The latter wore a very youthful shirt-waist, and her hair in a girlish fashion, which the school-teacher, who twisted hers severely from the straining roots at the nape of the neck to the small, smooth coil at the top, condemned as straining after effects no longer hers by right.

The librarian, who had a quick alertness of manner, addressed her.

"What room are you in, Miss Stark?" said she.

"I am at a loss how to designate the room," replied Miss Stark stiffly.

The librarian, whose name was Eliza Lippincott, turned abruptly to Miss Amanda Gill, over whose delicate face a curious color compounded of flush and pallor was stealing.

"What room did your aunt die in, Miss Amanda?" asked she abruptly.

Amanda cast a terrified glance at her sister, who was serving a second plate of pudding for the minister.

"That room," she replied feebly.

"That's what I thought," said the librarian with a certain triumph. "I calculated that must be the room she died in, for it's the best room in the house, and you haven't put anybody in it before. Somehow the room that anybody has died in lately is generally the last room anybody is put in."

The young minister looked up from his pudding. He was very spiritual, but he had had poor pickings in his previous boarding place, and he could not help a certain abstract enjoyment over Miss Gill's cooking.

"You certainly, Miss Lippincott," he remarked with his gentle, almost caressing inflection of tone, "do not for a minute believe that a higher power would allow any manifestation on the part of a disembodied spirit—who we trust is in her heavenly home—to harm one of His servants?"

"Oh, Mr. Dunn, of course not," replied Eliza Lippincott with a blush. "Of course not. I never meant to imply——"

"Of course dear Miss Harriet Gill was a professing Christian," remarked the widow, "and I don't suppose a professing Christian would come back and scare folks if she could. I wouldn't be a mite afraid to sleep in that room; I'd rather have it than the one I've got." Then she turned to Miss Stark. "Any time you feel timid in that room, I'm ready and willing to change with you," said she.

"Thank you. I have no desire to change. I am perfectly satisfied with my room," replied Miss Stark with freezing dignity, which was thrown away upon the widow.

Miss Louisa Stark did not sit down in the parlor with the other boarders after dinner. She went straight to her room. She felt tired after her journey, and meditated a loose wrapper and writing a few letters quietly before she went to bed. When she entered the southwest chamber she saw against the wall paper directly facing the door the waist of her best black satin dress hung over a picture.

"That is very strange," she said to herself, and a thrill of vague horror came over her. She knew, or thought she knew, that she had put that black satin dress waist away nicely folded between towels in her trunk.

She took down the black waist and laid it on the bed preparatory to folding it, but when she attempted to do so she discovered that the two sleeves were firmly sewed together. Louisa Stark stared at the sewed sleeves. "What does this mean?" she asked herself. She examined the sewing carefully; the stitches were small, and even, and firm, of black silk.

She moved toward the door. For a moment she thought that this was something legitimate, about which she might demand information; then she became doubtful.

Suppose she herself had done this absurd thing, or suppose that she had not, what was to hinder the others from thinking so—what was to hinder a doubt being cast upon her own memory and reasoning powers?

Louisa Stark had been on the verge of a nervous breakdown in spite of her iron constitution and her great will power. No woman can teach school for forty years with absolute impunity. She was more credulous as to her own possible failings than she had ever been in her whole life. She was cold with horror and terror, and yet not so much horror and terror of the supernatural as of her own self. The weakness of belief in the supernatural was nearly impossible for this strong nature. She could more easily believe in her own failing powers.

She started toward the mirror to unfasten her dress, then she remembered the strange circumstance of the brooch, and stopped short. Then she straightened herself defiantly and marched up to the bureau and looked in the glass. She saw reflected therein, fastening the lace at her throat, the old-fashioned thing of a large oval, a knot of fair and black hair under the glass, set in a rim of twisted gold. She unfastened it with trembling fingers and looked at it. It was her own brooch, the cluster of pearl grapes on black onyx. Louisa Stark placed the trinket in its little box on the nest of pink cotton and put it away in the bureau drawer. Only death could disturb her habit of order.

Her fingers were so cold they felt fairly numb as she unfastened her dress; she staggered when she slipped it over her head. She went to the closet to hang it up and recoiled. A strong smell of lovage came to her nostrils, a purple gown near the door swung softly against her face as if impelled by some wind from within. All the pegs were filled with garments not her own, mostly of somber black.

Suddenly Louisa Stark recovered her nerve. This, she told herself, was something distinctly tangible. Somebody had been taking liberties with her wardrobe. Somebody had been hanging some one else's clothes in her closet. She hastily slipped on her dress again and marched straight down stairs.

She found Sophia Gill standing by the kitchen table kneading dough with dignity.

"Miss Gill," said Miss Stark, with her

utmost school-teacher manner, "I wish to inquire why you have had my clothes removed from the closet in my room and others substituted?"

Sophia Gill stood, with her hand fast in the dough, regarding her. Her own face paled slowly and reluctantly, her mouth stiffened.

"I'll go upstairs with you, Miss Stark," said she, "and see what the trouble is." She spoke stiffly, with constrained civility.

Sophia and Louisa Stark went up to the southwest chamber. The closet door was shut. Sophia threw it open, then she looked at Miss Stark. On the pegs hung the school-teacher's own garments in orderly array.

"I can't see that there is anything wrong," remarked Sophia grimly.

Miss Stark sank down on the nearest chair. She saw her own clothes in the closet. She knew there had been no time for any human being to remove those which she thought she had seen and put hers in their places. She knew it was impossible. Again the awful horror of herself overwhelmed her.

She muttered something, she scarcely knew what. Sophia then went out of the room. In the morning Miss Stark did not go down to breakfast, and left before noon.

Directly the widow, Mrs. Elvira Simmons, knew that the school-teacher had gone, and the southwest room was vacant, she begged to have it in exchange for her own. Sophia hesitated a moment.

"I have no objections, Mrs. Simmons," said she, "if——"

"If what?" asked the widow.

"If you have common sense enough not to keep fussing because the room happens to be the one my aunt died in," said Sophia bluntly.

"Fiddlesticks!" said the widow.

That very afternoon she moved into the southwest chamber.

The widow was openly triumphant over her new room. She talked a deal about it at the dinner-table.

"You are sure you don't feel afraid of ghosts?" said the librarian. "I wouldn't sleep in that room after——" she checked herself with an eye on the minister.

"After what?" asked the widow.

"Nothing," replied Eliza Lippincott in an embarrassed fashion.

"You did see or hear something—now what was it, I want to know?" said the

widow that evening when they were alone in the parlor. The minister had gone to make a call.

"Well," said Eliza hesitatingly, "if you'll promise not to tell."

"Yes, I promise; what was it?"

"Well, one day last week just before the school-teacher came, I went into that room to see if there were any clouds. I wanted to wear my gray dress, and I was afraid it was going to rain, so I wanted to look at the sky at all points, and—— You know that chintz over the bed, and the valance? What pattern should you say it was?"

"Why, peacocks on a blue ground. Good land, I shouldn't think any one who had ever seen that would forget it."

"Well, when I went in there that afternoon it was not peacocks on a blue ground; it was great red roses on a yellow ground."

"Did Miss Sophia have it changed?"

"No. I went in there again an hour later and the peacocks were there."

The widow stared at her a moment, then she began to laugh rather hysterically.

"Well," said she, "I guess I sha'n't give up my nice room for any such tomfoolery as that. I guess I would just as soon have red roses on a yellow ground as peacocks on a blue; but there's no use talking, you couldn't have seen straight. How could such a thing have happened?"

"I don't know," said Eliza Lippincott, "but I know I wouldn't sleep in that room if you'd give me a thousand dollars."

When Mrs. Simmons went to the southwest chamber that night, she cast a glance at the bed-hanging. There were the peacocks on the blue ground. She gave a contemptuous thought of Eliza Lippincott.

But just before Mrs. Simmons was ready to get into bed she looked again at the hangings, and there were the red roses on the yellow ground instead of the peacocks on blue. She looked long and sharply. Then she crossed the room, turned her back to the bed, and looked out at the night from the east window. It was clear, and the full moon had just risen. She watched it a moment sailing over the dark blue in its nimbus of gold. Then she looked around at the bed hangings. She still saw the red roses on the yellow ground.

Mrs. Simmons was struck in the most vulnerable point. This apparent contradiction of the reasonable as manifested in such a commonplace thing as the chintz of a bed-

hanging affected this ordinary, unimaginative woman as no ghostly appearance could have done. Those red roses on the yellow ground were to her much more ghastly than any strange figure clad in the white robes of the grave entering the room.

She took a step toward the door, then she turned with a resolute air. "As for going downstairs and owning up I'm scared and having that Lippincott girl crowing over me, I won't for any red roses instead of peacocks. I guess they can't hurt me, and as long as we've both of us seen 'em I guess we can't both be getting loony," she said.

Mrs. Elvira Simmons blew out her light and got into bed. After a little she fell asleep.

But she was awakened about midnight by a strange sensation in her throat. She had dreamed that some one with long white fingers was strangling her, and she saw bending over her the face of an old woman in a white cap. When she waked there was no old woman, the room was almost as light as day in the full moonlight, and looked very peaceful; but the strangling sensation continued, and besides that, her face and ears felt muffled. She put up her hand and felt that her head was covered with a ruffled nightcap tied under her chin so tightly that it was exceedingly uncomfortable. A great quail of horror shot over her. She tore the thing off frantically and flung it from her with a convulsive effort as if it had been a spider. She sprang out of bed and was going toward the door when she stopped.

It suddenly occurred to her that Eliza Lippincott might have entered the room and tied on the cap while she was asleep. Then she tried to open the door, but to her astonishment found that it was bolted on the inside. "I must have locked it after all," she reflected with wonder, for she never locked her door.

She went toward the spot where she had thrown the cap—she had stepped over it on her way to the door—but it was not there. She searched the whole room, lighting the lamp, but she could not find the cap. Finally she gave it up. She extinguished her lamp and went back to bed. She fell asleep again, to be again awakened in the same fashion. That time she tore off the cap as before, but she did not fling it on the floor. Instead, she held to it with a fierce grip. Her blood was up.

Holding fast to the flimsy white thing, she

sprang out of bed, ran to the window which was open, slipped the screen, and flung it out; but a sudden gust of wind, though the night was calm, arose and it floated back in her face. She clutched at it. It eluded her clutching fingers. Then she did not see it at all. She examined the floor, she lighted her lamp again and searched, but there was no sign of it.

Mrs. Simmons was then in such a rage that all terror had disappeared for the time. To be baffled like this and resisted by something which was nothing to her straining senses filled her with intensest resentment.

Finally she got back into bed again; she did not go to sleep. She felt strangely drowsy, but she fought against it. She was wide awake, staring at the moonlight, when she suddenly felt the soft white strings of the thing tighten round her throat and realized that her enemy was again upon her. She seized the strings, untied them, twitched off the cap, ran with it to the table where her scissors lay and furiously cut it into small bits. She cut and tore, feeling an insane fury of gratification.

She tossed the bits of muslin into a basket and went back to bed. Almost immediately she felt the soft strings tighten round her throat. Then at last she yielded, vanquished. This new refutation of all the laws of reason by which she had learned, as it were, to spell her theory of life was too much for her equilibrium. She pulled off the clinging strings feebly, drew the thing from her head, slid weakly out of bed, caught up her wrapper and hastened out of the room. She went noiselessly along the hall to her own old room, entered it, got into her familiar bed, and lay there the rest of the night shuddering and listening, and if she dozed, waking with a start at the feeling of the pressure upon her throat—to find that it was not there, yet still unable to shake off entirely the horror.

She went down to breakfast the next morning with an imperturbable face. When asked by Eliza Lippincott how she had slept, she replied with an appearance of calmness which was bewildering that she had not slept very well. She never did sleep very well in a new bed, and she thought she would go back to her old room.

Eliza Lippincott was not deceived, however, neither were the Gill sisters, nor the young girl Flora. Eliza Lippincott spoke out bluntly.

"You needn't talk to me about sleeping well," said she. "I know something queer happened in that room last night by the way you act."

They all looked at Mrs. Simmons inquiringly—the librarian with malicious curiosity and triumph, the minister with sad incredulity, Sophia Gill with fear and indignation, Amanda and the young girl with unmixed terror. The widow bore herself with dignity.

"I saw nothing nor heard nothing which I trust could not have been accounted for in some rational manner," said she.

"What was it?" persisted Eliza Lippincott.

"I do not wish to discuss the matter any further," replied Mrs. Simmons shortly. Then she passed her plate for more creamed potato. She felt that she would die before she confessed to the ghastly absurdity of that nightcap, or to having been disturbed by the flight of peacocks off a blue field of chintz. She left the whole matter so vague that in a fashion she came off the mistress of the situation.

That afternoon the young minister, John Dunn, went to Sophia Gill and requested permission to occupy the southwest chamber that night.

"I don't ask to have my effects moved there," said he, "for I could scarcely afford a room so much superior to the one I now occupy, but I should like, if you please, to sleep there to-night for the purpose of refuting in my own person any unfortunate superstition which may have obtained root here."

Sophia Gill thanked the minister gratefully and eagerly accepted his offer.

That night about twelve o'clock the Reverend John Dunn essayed to go to his nightly slumber in the southwest chamber. He had been sitting up until that hour preparing his sermon.

He traversed the hall with a little night-lamp in his hand; he opened the door of the southwest chamber and essayed to enter. He might as well have essayed to enter the solid side of a house. He could look into the room full of soft lights and shadows under the moonlight which streamed in at the windows. He could see the bed in which he had expected to pass the night, but he could not enter. Whenever he strove to do so, he had a curious sensation as if he were trying to press against an invisible person who met him with a force of opposi-

tion impossible to overcome. The minister was not an athletic man, yet he had considerable strength. He squared his elbows, set his mouth hard, and strove to push his way through into the room. The opposition which he met was as sternly and mutely terrible as the rocky fastness of a mountain in his way.

For a half-hour John Dunn, doubting, raging, overwhelmed with spiritual agony as to the state of his own soul rather than fear, strove to enter the southwest chamber. He was simply powerless against this uncanny obstacle. Finally a great horror as of evil itself came over him. He was a nervous man and very young. He fairly fled to his own chamber and locked himself in like a terror-stricken girl.

The next morning he went to Miss Gill and told her frankly what had happened.

"What it is I know not, Miss Sophia," said he, "but I firmly believe, against my will, that there is in that room some accursed evil power at work of which modern faith and modern science know nothing."

Miss Sophia Gill listened with grimly lowering face.

"I think I will sleep in that room myself to-night," she said, when the minister had finished.

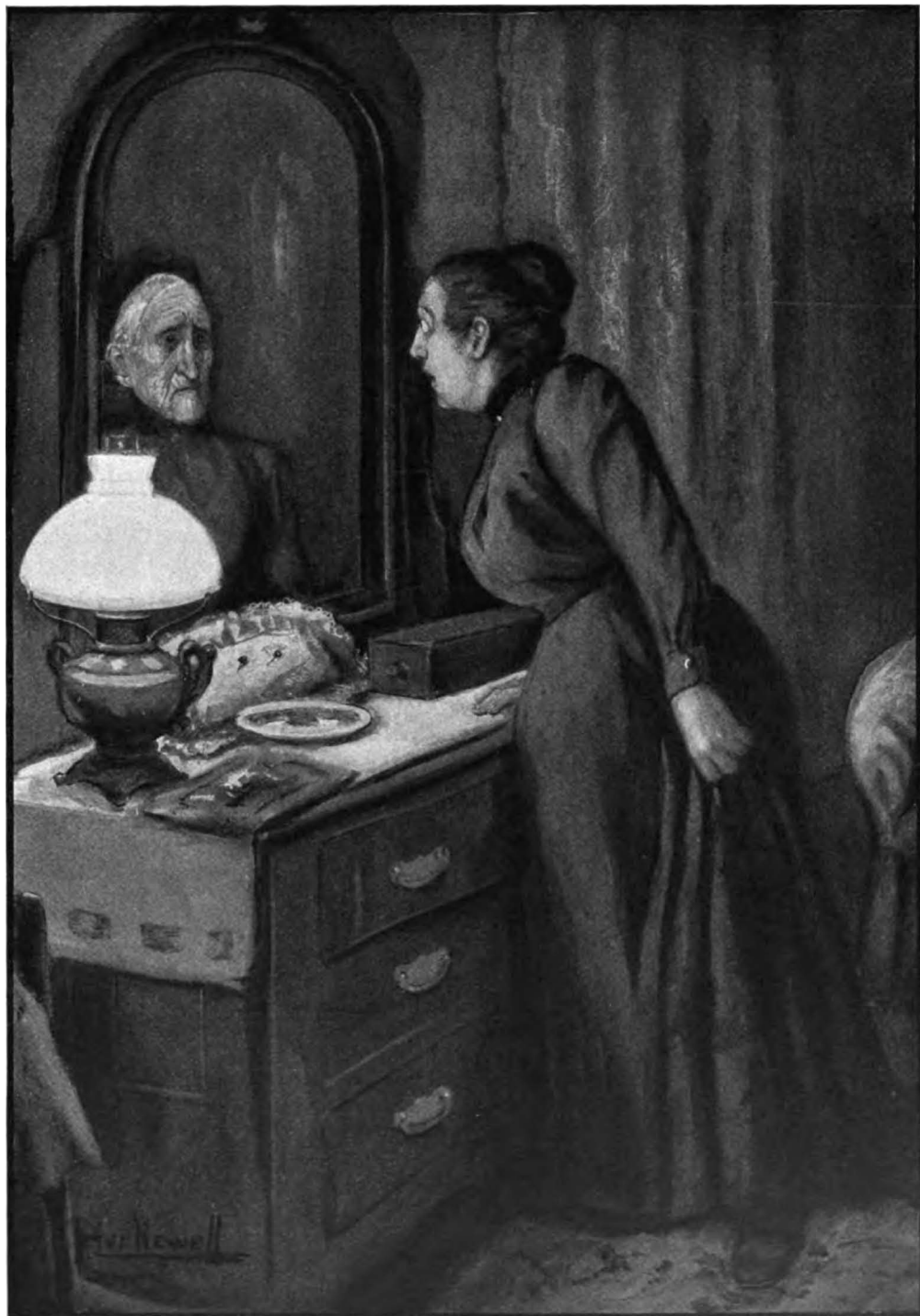
There were occasions when Miss Sophia Gill could put on a manner of majesty, and she did now.

It was ten o'clock that night when Sophia Gill entered the southwest chamber. She had told her sister what she intended doing and had been proof against her tearful entreaties. Amanda was charged not to tell the young girl, Flora.

"There is no use in frightening that child over nothing," said Sophia.

Sophia, when she entered the southwest chamber, set the lamp which she carried on the bureau, and began moving about the room, pulling down the curtains, taking the nice white counterpane off the bed, and preparing generally for the night.

As she did so, moving with great coolness and deliberation, she became conscious that she was thinking some thoughts that were foreign to her. She began remembering what she could not have remembered, since she was not then born: the trouble over her mother's marriage, the bitter opposition, the shutting the door upon her, the ostracizing her from heart and home. She became aware of a most singular sensation



"THE FACE OF A VERY OLD WOMAN, SCOWLING FOREVER."

of bitter resentment, and not against the mother and sister who had so treated her own mother, but against her own mother herself, and then she became aware of a like bitterness extended to her own self. She felt malignant toward her mother as a young girl whom she remembered, though she could not have remembered, and she felt malignant toward her own self, and her sister Amanda, and Flora. Evil suggestions surged in her brain—suggestions which turned her heart to stone and which still fascinated her. And all the time by a sort of double consciousness she knew that what she thought was strange and not due to her own volition. She knew that she was thinking the thoughts of some other person, and she knew who. She felt herself possessed.

But there was tremendous strength in the woman's nature. She had inherited strength for good and righteous self-assertion from the evil strength of her ancestors. They had turned their own weapons against themselves. She made an effort which seemed more than human, and was conscious that the hideous thing was gone from her. She thought her own thoughts. Then she scouted to herself the idea of anything supernatural about the terrific experience. "I am imagining everything," she told herself.

She went on with her preparations; she went to the bureau to take down her hair. She looked in the glass and saw, instead of her own face, middle-aged and good to see,

with its expression of a life of honesty and good-will to others and patience under trials, the face of a very old woman scowling forever with unceasing hatred and misery at herself and all others, at life and death, at that which had been and that which was to come. She saw, instead of her own face in the glass, the face of her dead Aunt Harriet, topping her own shoulders in her own well-known dress!

Sophia Gill left the room. She went into the one which she shared with her sister Amanda. Amanda looked up and saw her standing there with her handkerchief pressed to her face.

"Oh, Sophia, let me call in somebody. Is your face hurt? Sophia, what is the matter with your face?" fairly shrieked Amanda.

Suddenly Sophia took the handkerchief from her face.

"Look at me, Amanda Gill," she said.

Amanda looked, shrinking.

"What is it? Oh, what is it? You don't look hurt. What is it, Sophia?"

"What do you see?"

"Why, I see you."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. What did you think I would see?"

Sophia Gill looked at her sister.

"Never as long as I live will I tell you what I thought you would see, and you must never ask me," said she. "I am going to sell this house."