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DR. RUMSEY'S PATIENT:

A VERY STRANGE STORY.

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Joint authors of "Stories from the Diary of a Doctor."

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SYNOPSIS OF PREVIOUS CHAPTERS.

CHAPTER I. & II.—Pretty Hetty Armitage, niece of Mr. and Mrs. Armitage, who lived at the village of Grandcourt, is introduced by two young women, graduates named Horace Frere and Everett, and his wife. She is a bright, lively girl, who, however, Hetty, who is a born flirt, is in love with Mr. Robert Armitage, the son of the Squire, upon whom, however, she is thought to be the cause of his not being a total abstemious man. The most important events of her life, while she is a student, are remembered. Armitage is passing a brook side when Frere asks Hetty to give him a kiss as his fiancée wife. She refuses, and as they are struggling, Armitage intervenes and takes the girl home. Frere is enraged, and visiting the inn again asks Hetty for her decision between Armitage and himself. She speedily declares for Armitage, much to Frere's chagrin.

CHAPTER III. & IV.—Frere, after this interview with Hetty, rushes out into the night, followed at a distance by Everett, who cannot understand the cause of his agitation. Frere, on Salisbury Plain, meets Armitage, and a quarrel ensues between them. They fight, and Armitage prods Frere through the eye with a short stick which he carries, and which he afterwards buries when he finds that Frere is dead. He reaches home and finds a note waiting for him inviting him to a morning picnic on Salisbury Plain to join a young lady, Margaret Douglas, whom he much admires. He returns to rest, and next morning awakes with his memory a blank with regard to his encounter with Frere. The cure of his race has come upon him. He joins in the picnic, and chats about his knowledge of Frere and Hetty, and wonders if the charge made against Everett, who has been accused of the murder, will be sustained. At the conclusion of the picnic he declares his love for Margaret, and is accepted.

CHAPTER V. & VI.—A witness of the terrible deed was Hetty Armitage, who suggests the facts to Armitage, but, his mind a perfect blank, he remembers nothing of the circumstances of the case, and has an idea that Everett did not himself kill the murderer. Hetty, very badly afflicted, confesses that she has seen to her aunt under a promise of secrecy.

CHAPTER IX.—

Arthur Rumsey, M. D., F. R. C. S., was one of the most remarkable men of his time. He was unmarried, and lived in a large house in Harley Street, where he saw many patients daily. He was on the staff of more than one of the big London hospitals, and one or two mornings in each week had to be devoted to this public service, which occupies so much of the life of a busy and popular doctor. Rumsey was not only a clever, all-round man, but he was also a specialist. The word nerve—that queer complex word, with its many hidden meanings, that darts and hourly renders—these were words which he especially to the end of our century, seized with a grip of psychological intensity, and made it his principal study. By slow degrees and years of patient toil he began to understand the nerve power in man. From the study of the nerves to the study of the source of all nerves, aches and pains, joys and delights, the human brain, was an easy step. Rumsey was a brain specialist. It began to be reported of him, not only in the profession, but amongst that class of patients who must flock to such a man, when he had performed wonderful and extraordinary cures, that to him was given insight almost super-human. It was said of Rumsey that he could read motives and could also unravel the most complex problems of the psychological world.

Five years had passed since Margaret Douglas found herself the bride of Robert Armitage. These five years had been mostly spent by the pair in London. Being well off, Armitage had taken a good house in a fashionable quarter. He and Margaret began to entertain, and were popular from the very first, in their own somewhat large circle. They were now the parents of one beautiful child, a boy, and the outside world invariably spoke of them as a prosperous and very happy couple.

Everett did not expiate his supposed crime by death. The plea of the jury for mercy resulted in fourteen years' penal servitude. Such a sentence meant, of course, a living death; he had quite sunk out of ken—almost out of memory. Except in the heart of his mother and in the tender heart of Margaret Armitage, this young man, whose career had promised to be so bright, so satisfactory, such a blessing to all who knew him, was completely forgotten.

In his mother's heart, of course, he was safely enshrined, and Margaret also, although she had never spoken to him, and never saw his face until the day of the trial, still vividly remembered him.

When her honeymoon was over and she found herself settled in London, one of her first acts was to seek out Mrs. Everett, and to make a special friend of the forlorn and unhappy widow.

Both Margaret and Mrs. Everett soon found that they had a strong bond of sympathy between them. They both absolutely believed in Frank Everett's innocence. The subject, however, was too painful to the elder woman to be often alluded to, but knowing what was in Margaret's heart she took a great fancy to her, always spoke to her with affection, took a real interest in her concerns, and was often a visitor at her home.

Four years after the wedding the elder Squire died. He was found one morning dead in his bed, having passed peacefully and painlessly away. Armitage was now the owner of Grandcourt, but for some reason which he could not explain, even to himself, he did not care to spend much time at the old place—Margaret was often there for months at a time, but Armitage preferred London to the Court, and a week at a time was the longest period he would ever spend under the old roof. Both of his sisters were now married and had homes of their own—the place in consequence began to grow a little into disuse, although Margaret did what she could for the tenantry, and whenever she was at the Court was extremely popular with her neighbours. But she did not think it right to leave her husband long alone—he clung to her a good deal, seeking her opinion more and more as the months and years went by, and leaning upon her to an extraordinary extent for a young and clever man.

Armitage had grown exceptionally old for his age in the five years since his marriage. He was only twenty-six, but some white streaks were already to be found in his thick hair, and several wrinkles were perceptible round his dark gray eyes. He had not gone into Parliament—he had not dis-

tinguished himself by any literary work. His own ambitious dreams, and his wife's longings for him faded one by one out of sight. He was a gentle, kindly-mannered man—generous with his money, sympathetic up to a certain point out of every tale of woe, but there was a curious want of energy about him, and as the days and months flew by Margaret's sense of trouble, which always lay near her heart, unaccountably deepened.

The great specialist, Arthur Rumsey, was about to give a dinner. It was his custom to give one once a fortnight during the London season. To these dinners he not only invited his own friends and the more favored amongst his patients, but many celebrated men of science and literature; a few also of the better sort of the smart people of society were to be met on these occasions. Although there was on hosts, Rumsey's dinners were popular, his invitations were always eagerly accepted, and the people who met each other at his house often spoke afterwards of these occasions as specially delightful.

In short, the dinner partook of that intellectual quality which makes, to quote an old-world phrase, "the feast of reason and the flow of soul." On Rumsey's evenings, the forgotten art of conversation seemed once again to struggle to re-assert itself.

Robert Armitage and his wife were often amongst the favored guests, and were to be present at this special dinner. Margaret was a distant cousin of the great physician, and shortly after her arrival in London had consulted him about her husband. She had told him all about the family history, and the curious hereditary taint which had shown itself from generation to generation in certain members of the men of the house. He had listened gravely, and with much interest, saying very little at the time, and endeavoring by every means in his power to sooth the anxieties of the young wife.

"The doom you dread may never fall upon your husband," he said, finally. "The slight inertia of mind which he complains of is probably more due to nervous fear than to anything else. It is a pity he is so well off. If he had to work for his living, he would soon use his brain to good and healthy purpose. That fat which fell upon Adam is in reality a blessing in disguise. There is no surer cure for most of the fads and fancies of the present day than the command which ordains to man that 'In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread.'"

Margaret's anxious eyes were fixed upon the great doctor while he was speaking. "Your husband must make the best of his circumstances," he continued in cheerful tone. "Crowd occupation upon him; get him to take up any good intellectual work with strength and vigor. If you see he is really tired out, do not overwork him. Get him to travel with you; get him to read books with real stuff in them; occupy his mind at any risk. When he begins to forget serious matters it will be time enough to come to the conclusion that the hereditary curse has descended upon him. Up to the present he has never forgotten anything of consequence, has he?"

"Nothing that I know of," answered Margaret. Then she added, with a half-smile, "The small lapse of memory which I am about to mention, you will probably consider beneath your notice, nevertheless it has irritated my husband to a strange degree. You have doubtless heard of the tragic murder of Horace Frere, which took place on Salisbury Plain a few weeks before our wedding?"

Rumsey nodded.

"On the night of the murder my husband lost his favourite walking-stick. He has worried ceaselessly over that small fact, referring to it constantly and always complaining of a certain numbness in the back of his head when he does so. The fact is he met the unfortunate man who was murdered early in the afternoon. At that time he had his stick with him. He can never recall anything about it from that moment, nor has he seen it from then to now."

The doctor laughed good-humouredly. "There is little doubt," he said, "that the fear that the doom of his house may fasten upon him, has affected your husband's nerves. The lapse of memory to which you refer means nothing at all. Keep him occupied, Mrs. Armitage, keep him occupied. That is my best advice to you."

Margaret went away feeling reassured and almost happy, but since the date of that conversation Rumsey never forgot Armitage's queer case. He possessed that extraordinary and perfect memory himself, which does not allow the smallest detail, however apparently unimportant, to escape observation, and often as he talked to his guest across his dinner table, he observed him with a keenness of interest which he could himself scarcely account for.

On this particular evening more guests than usual were assembled at the doctor's house. Sixteen people had sat down to dinner and several fresh arrivals were expected in the evening. Amongst the dining guests was Mrs. Everett. She was a tall, handsome woman of about forty-five years of age. Her hair was snow white and was piled high up over her head—her face was of a pale olive hue, with regular features, and very large, piercing, dark eyes. The eyebrows were well arched and somewhat thickly marked—they were still raven black, and afforded a striking contrast to the lovely thick hair which shone like a mass of silver above her brow.

Everett's mother always wore black, but curious to relate she had discarded widow's weeds soon after her son's incarceration. Before that date she had been in character, and had also lived the life of an ordinary affectionate, and thoroughly amiable woman. Keen as her sorrow in parting with the husband of her youth was, she contrived to weave a happy nest in which her heart could take shelter, in the passionate love which she gave to her only son. But from the date of his trial and verdict, the woman's whole character, the very expression on her face had altered. Her eyes had now a watchful and intent look. She seem-

ed like some who had set a mission before herself. She had the look of one who lived for a hidden purpose. She no longer eschewed society, but went into it even more frequently than her somewhat slender means afforded. She made many new acquaintances and was always eager to win the confidence of those who cared to confide in her. Her own story she never touched upon, but she gave a curious kind of watchful sympathy to others which was not without its charm.

On this particular night, the widow's eyes were brighter and more restless than usual. Dr. Rumsey knew all about her story, and had often counselled her with regard to her present attitude towards society at large.

"My boy is innocent," she had said many times to the doctor. "The object of my life is to prove this. I will quietly wait, I will do nothing rash, but it is my firm conviction that I shall yet be permitted to find and expose the man who killed Horace Frere."

Rumsey had warned her as to the peril which she ran in fostering too keenly a fixed idea—he had taken pains to give her psychological reasons for the danger which she incurred—but nothing he could say or do could alter the bias of her mind. Her fixed and unwavering assurance that her boy was absolutely innocent could not be imperilled by any words which man could speak.

"If I had even seen my boy do the murder I should still believe it to be a vision of my own brain," she had said once, and after that Rumsey had ceased to try to guide her thoughts into a healthier channel.

On this particular night when the doctor came upstairs after wine, accompanied by the rest of the men of the party, Mrs. Everett seemed to draw him to her side by her watchful and excited glances.

There was something about the man which could not withstand an appeal to human need—he went straight now to the widow's side as a needle is attracted to a magnet.

"Well," he said, drawing a chair forward, and seating himself so as almost to face her.

"You guessed that I wanted to see you?" she said, eagerly.

"I looked at you and that was sufficient," he said.

"When can you give me an interview?" she replied.

"Do you want to visit me as a patient?"

"I do not—that is, not in the ordinary sense."

"I want to tell you something. I have a story to relate, and when it is told I should like to get your verdict on a certain peculiar case—in short, I believe I have got a clue, it only a slight one, to the unravelling of the mystery of my life—you quite understand?"

"Yes, I understand," replied Dr. Rumsey in a gentle voice, "but, my dear lady, I am not a detective."

"Not in the ordinary sense, but surely as far as the complex heart is concerned."

Dr. Rumsey held up his hand.

"We need not go into that," he said.

"No, we will not. May I see you tomorrow for a few minutes?"

The doctor consulted his note-book.

"I cannot see you as a patient," he said, "but as a friend it is possible. Can you be here at eight o'clock to-morrow morning?"

He breakfasted at eight—my breakfast generally occupies ten minutes—that time is at your disposal."

"I will be with you. Thank you a thousand times," she replied.

Here they grew bright with exultation. The doctor favoured her with a keen glance and moved aside. A few minutes later he found himself in Margaret Armitage's vicinity. Margaret was now a very beautiful woman. As a girl she had been lovely, but her early manhood had developed her charms, had added to her stateliness, and had brought out many new and fresh expressions in her mobile and lovely face.

As Rumsey approached her side, she was in the act of taking leave of an old friend of her husband's, who was going away early. The doctor was therefore able to watch her for a minute without her observing him—then she turned slightly, saw him, flushed vividly, and went eagerly and swiftly to his side.

"Dr. Rumsey," said Margaret, "I know this is not the place to make appointments, but I am anxious to see you on the subject of my husband's health. How soon can you manage?"

"I can make an appointment for to-morrow," he interrupted. "Be with me at half-past one. I can give you half an hour quite undisturbed then."

She did not smile, but her eyes were raised fully to his face. Those dark, deep eyes so full of the noblest emotions, which can stir the human soul, looked at him now with a pathos that touched his heart. He moved away to talk to other friends, but the thought of Margaret Armitage returned to him many times during the ensuing night.

CHAPTER X.

At the appointed hour on the following morning Mrs. Everett was shown into Dr. Rumsey's presence. She found him in his cosy breakfast room, in the act of helping himself to coffee.

"Ah!" he said, as he placed a chair for her, "what an excellent thing this punctuality is in a woman. Sit down, pray. You shall have your full ten minutes—the clock is only on the stroke of eight."

Mrs. Everett looked too disturbed and anxious even to smile. She untied her bonnet strings, threw back her mantle, and stared straight at Dr. Rumsey.

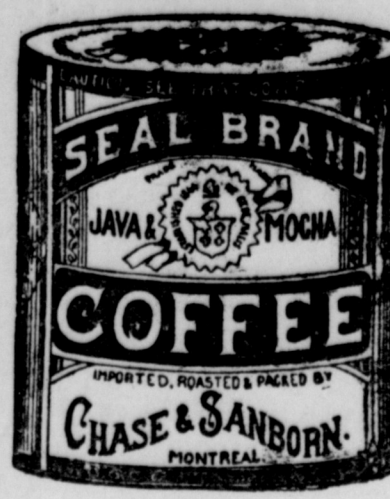
"No coffee, thank you," she said. "I breakfasted long ago. Dr. Rumsey, I am nearly wild with excitement and anxiety. I told you long ago, did I not, that a day would come when I should get a clue which might lead to establishing my boy's innocence? Well, it has come—my only boy's innocence? Nothing that can happen now will ever, of course, repair what he has lost—his lost youth, his lost healthy outlook on life—but to set him free, even now! To give him his liberty once again! To feel the clasp of his hand on mine! Ah, I nearly go mad at times with longing, but thank God, thank the Providence which is above us all, I do believe I have found a clue at last."

"Tell me what it is," said the doctor, in a kind voice. "I know," he added, "you will make your story as brief as possible."

"I will, my good friend," she replied. She stood up now, her somewhat long arms hung at her sides, she turned her face in all its intense purpose full upon the doctor.

"You know my restless nature," she continued. "I can seldom or never sit still—even my sleep is broken by terrible dreams."

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All the energy which I possess is fixed upon one thought, and one only—I want to find the real murderer of Horace Frere."

"Yes," said Dr. Rumsey.

"A fortnight ago I determined to visit Grandcourt—I mean the village of that name."

The doctor started.

"You are surprised?" said Mrs. Everett; "nevertheless, I can account for my longings."

"You need not explain, I quite understand."

"I believe you do. I felt drawn to the place—to the Inn where my son stayed, to the neighbourhood. I travelled down to Grandcourt without announcing my intention to anyone, and arrived at this Inn just as the dusk was setting in. The landlady, Armitage by name, came out to interview me. I told him who I was. He looked much disturbed, and by no means pleased, I asked him if he would take me in. He went away to consult his wife. She followed him after a moment into the porch with a scared face."

"I wonder ma'am, that you like to come here," she said.

"I come for one purpose," I replied. "I want to see the spot where Horace Frere met his death. I am drawn to this place by the greater agony which has ever torn a mother's heart. Will you take me in, and will you give me the room in which my son slept?"

"The landlady looked at me in anything but a friendly manner. Her husband whispered something to her—after a time her brow cleared—she nodded to him, and the next moment I was given to understand that my son's old room would be at my disposal. I took possession of it that evening, and my meals were served to me in the little parlour, where my boy and the unfortunate Horace Frere had lived together."

"The next day I went out alone in an early hour to visit the Plain. I never ventured on Salisbury Plain before. The day was a gloomy and stormy one. There were constant showers of rain and I was almost wet through by the time I reached my destination. I had just got upon the borders of the Plain when I saw a young woman walking a little ahead of me. There was something in her gait which I seemed to recognise, although at first I had only a dim idea that I had ever seen her before. Hurrying my footsteps I came up to her, passed her, and as I did so looked her full in the face. I started then and stopped short. She was the girl who had seen the murder committed, and who had given evidence of the most damning kind against my son on the day of the trial. In that one swift glance I saw that she was much altered. She had been a remarkably pretty girl. She had now nearly lost all her comeliness of appearance. Her face was thin, her dress negligent and untidy, on her brow there was a sullen frown. When she saw me she stood still, her eyes dilated with a curious expression of fear."

"Who are you?" she said with a pant. "I am Mrs. Everett," I replied, slowly. "I am the mother of the man who once lodged in your uncle's house, and who is now expiating the crime of another at Portland Prison."

She had turned red at first, now she became white.

"And your name," I continued, "is Hetty Armitage?"

"Why do you say that your son is expiating the crime of another?" she asked.

"Because I am his mother. I have looked into his heart, and there is no murder there. But tell me, is your name not Hetty Armitage?"

"It is not Armitage now," she answered.

"I am married. I live about three miles near," I said. Are you happy?"

"She gave me a queer glance."

"No, ma'am," she answered, "my heart is full of bitterness, of sorrow. Her eyes looked quite wild. She pressed one of her hands to her forehead, then, stepping out, she half turned round to me."

"I am going home now. My husband's name is Vincent. He is a farmer."

"You don't look too well off," I said, for I noticed her shabby dress and run-to-seed appearance.

"These are hard times for farmers," she answered.

"Have you children?" I asked.

"No," she replied, fiercely, "I am glad to say I have not."

"Why are you glad?" I asked. "Surely a child is the crown of a married woman's bliss."

"It would not be to me," she cried. "My heart is full to the brim. I have no room for a child in it."

"I wish you good morning, Mrs. Everett," she said. "My way lies across here."

"Stay a moment before you leave me," I said. I am coming to this plain on a mission which you perhaps can guess. If you are poor you will not despise half a sovereign. I'll give you half a sovereign if you'll show me the exact spot where the murder was committed."

"She turned from white to red, and from red to white again."

"I don't like that spot," she said. "That night was a terrible night to me; my nerves ain't what they were—I sleep bad, and sometimes I dream. Many and many a time I've seen that murder committed over again. I have seen the look on the face of the man who did it—oh, my God, I have seen—"

"She pressed her two hands hard against her eyes."

"I waited quietly until she had recovered her emotion; then I held out the little gold coin."

"You will take me to the spot?" I asked.

"She clutched the coin suddenly in her hand."

"This will buy what I live for," she cried with passion. "I can drown thought with this. Come along, ma'am, we are not very far from the place here. I'll take you and then go on home."

"She started off, walking in front of me, and keeping well ahead. She went quickly and yet with a sort of tremulous movement as though she were not quite certain of herself. We crossed the Plain not far from the Court. I saw the house in the distance and the curling smoke which rose up out of the trees."

"Don't walk so fast," I said. "I am an old woman, and you take my breath away."

"She slackened her steps, but very unwillingly."

"The family are not often at the Court?" I queried.

"No," she answered with a start—"since the old Squire died the place has been most shut up."

"I happen to know the present Squire and his wife," I said.

"She flushed when I said this, gave me a furtive glance, and then pressing one hand to her breast, said abruptly:

"If you know you can tell me summat—he is well, is he?"

"They are both well," I answered, surprised at the tone of her voice. "I should judge them to be a happy couple."

"I thank the good God that Mr. Robert is happy," she said, in a hoarse sort of whisper.

"Once again she hurried her footsteps; at last she stood still on a rising knoll of ground."

"Do you see this clump of alders?" she said. "It was here I stood, just on this spot—I was sheltered by the alders, and even if the night had not been so dark they would never have noticed me. Over there to your right it was done. You don't want me to stay any longer now, ma'am, do you?"

"You can go when I have asked you one or two questions. You stood here, you say—just here?"

"Just here ma'am," she answered.

"And the murder was committed there?"

"Yes, where the grass seems to grow a bit greener—oo notice it, don't you, just there, to your right."

"I see," I replied with a shudder, which I could not repress. "Do you mind telling me how it was that you happened to be out of your bed at such a late hour at night?"

"She looked very sullen, and set her lips tightly. I gazed full at her, waiting for her to speak."

"The man whose blood was shed was my lover—we had just had a quarrel," she said at last.

"What about?"

"That's my secret," she replied.

"How is it you did not mention the fact of the quarrel at the trial?" I asked.

"She looked full up at me."

"I was not asked," she answered; "that's my secret, and I don't tell it to anybody. It was here I stood, just where your feet are planted, and I saw it done—the moon came out for a minute, and I saw everything—even to the look on the dead man's face and the look on the face of the man who took his life. I saw it all. I ain't been the same woman since."

"I am not surprised," I replied. "You may leave me when I have said one thing."

"What is that, ma'am?"

"She raised her dark eyes. I saw fear in their depths."

"You saw two men that night, Hetty Vincent," I said—"one, the man who was murdered, was Horace Frere, but the other man, as there is a God above, was not Frank Everett. I am speaking the truth—you can go now."

"My words seemed forced from me, Dr. Rumsey, but the effect was terrifying. The wretched creature fell on her knees—she clung to my dress, covering her face with a portion of the mantle which I was wearing."

"Good God, why do you say that?" she gasped. "How do you know? Who has told you? Why do you say awful words of that sort?"

"Her excitement made me calm. I stood perfectly silent, but with my heart beating with the queerest sense of exultation and victory."

"Get up," I said. She rose trembling to her feet. I laid my hand on her shoulder. "You have something to confess," I said. "She looked at me again and burst out laughing."

"What a fool I made of myself just now," she said. "I have nothing to confess; what could I have? You spoke so solemn and the place is queer—it always upsets me. I'll go now," she backed a few steps away. "I saw two men on the Plain," she said then raising her voice, "one was Horace Frere—the other was your son, Frank Everett. Before I could another word she took to her heels and was quickly out of sight."

"I returned to the Inn and questioned Armitage and his wife. I did not dare to tell them what Hetty had said in her excitement, but I asked for her address and drove out early the following morning to Vincent's farm to visit her. I was told on my arrival that she had left home that morning; that she often did so to visit a relation at a distance. I asked for the address, which was given me somewhat unwillingly. That night I went there, but Hetty had not arrived and nothing was known about her. Since then I have tried vain to get any clue to her present whereabouts. That is my story, Dr. Rumsey. What do you think of it? Are the wild stories of an excited and over-wrought woman worthy of careful consideration? Is her sudden flight suspicious, or the reverse? I anxiously await your verdict."

Dr. Rumsey remained silent for a moment.

"I am inclined to believe," he said, then very slowly, "that the words uttered by this young woman were merely the result of over-strung nerves; remember, she was in all probability in love with the man who met his death in so tragic a manner. From the remarkable charge which you speak of in her appearance, I should say that her nerves had been considerably shattered by the sight she witnessed, and also by the prominent place she was obliged to take in the trial. She has probably dreamt of this thing, and dwelt upon it year in and year out, since it happened. Then, remember, you spoke in a very startling manner; a practically accused her of having committed perjury at the time of the trial. Under such circumstances and in the surroundings she was in at the time, she would be very likely to lose her head. As to her sudden disappearance, I confess I cannot quite understand it, unless her nervous system is even more shattered than you incline me to believe; but, stay, from words she inadvertently let drop, she has evidently become addicted to drink, to opium eating, or some such form of self-indulgence. If that is the case she would be scarcely responsible for her actions. I do not think, Mrs. Everett, unless you can obtain further evidence, that there is anything to go upon in this."

"That is your carefully considered opinion?"

"It is—I am sorry if it disappoints you."

"It does not do that, for I cannot agree with you."

Mrs. Everett rose as she spoke, fastened her cloak, and tied her bonnet strings.

"Your opinion is the cool one of an acute rascal, but also of a person who outside the circumstances," she continued, Rumsey smiled.

"Surely in such a case mine ought to be the one to be relied upon," he queried.

"No, for there is such a thing as a mother's instinct. I will not detain you longer, Dr. Rumsey. You have said what I expected you would say."