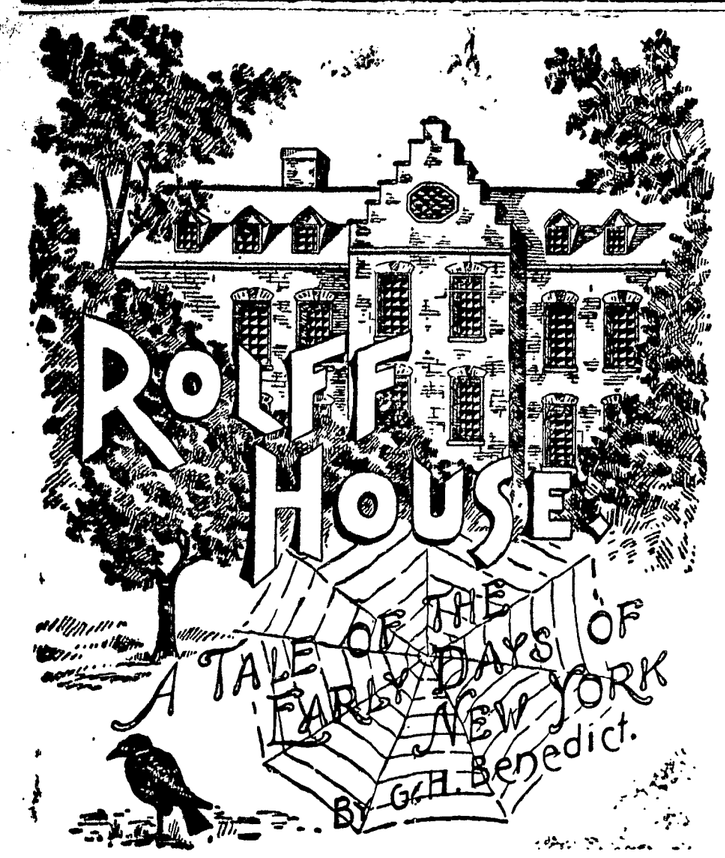

CHAPTER V.

On the principal street of Voorhisville, a little white house obtruded itself boldly out to the line of the unpaved sidewalk. Over the door, a small sign bore the inscription, "Anthony Saybrook, Counsellor-at-Law."

Fronting on the street was the office of Mr. Saybrook, and the rest of the building was occupied by Mr. Saybrook, son and housekeeper as a domicile.

Mr. Saybrook was one of a trio of lawyers, with which the village was blessed, for it was the shire town of the section, and drew to it whatever litigation the quiet farming region indulged in.

He believed himself to be a great man confined to a petty sphere. In appearance, he was tall and rather lank. His forehead protruded, his thin black hair was sprinkled with grey, and the top of his head showed a small circular bald spot; his nose was rather long and sharp, and there was just the suggestion of a roseate tinge at the tip, his eyes were small and wiry, and the expression was that of restlessness and discontent.

On a lounge in the office lolled the younger Saybrook. The young man might have been twenty-two, and had the lank form of his sire without its more ungainly development. His features were also less sharp, and on the whole he was not an unattractive young man, but the experienced eye could easily determine that he would in time grow into a pretty close copy of his father.

The elder Saybrook had just entered the office and thrown himself into a chair.

"Oh, how tired I am," he whined, as he stretched himself in his easy chair. "It is always the old story with me—work, work, think, think, till body and brain are ready to give out. But I don't know as I should complain I have had a good day's work, Ralph; yes, yes, a good day's work."

"You have drawn up the will, then?" suggested the young man.

"Yes," was the reply; "it is drawn, signed, sealed, witnessed and recorded—so that job is settled. But what a time I have had of it! I am wearied to death. I carried every point, however.

That is some satisfaction. In fact, things worked as well as I could have wished. I had some difficulty in getting the old lady to give up some of her crochets; but I finally persuaded her entirely to my views. But what is best, I am myself made sole executor of the estate. Now, I call that a pretty fine stroke of business. It needed very adroit working of the cards on my part, but I flatter myself that I proved equal to the occasion.

"Of course, the nephew gets everything then?" said the son.

"Yes, yes; that was my chief point, you know. The old lady's family pride was all in the direction of giving the nephew everything; but she had some queer notions, and it needed all my finesse to induce her to dismiss them. Only one thing troubles me. The money is not nearly so much as there was reason to suppose. This perhaps is not to be regretted, for I see the way clear in consequence of it for a very bold stroke. But it is queer—very queer. It almost leads one to believe in the stories of old Magnus Rolff's money vaults, and their control by the Evil One. What can the old lady have done with all her cash? It is strange—very strange. Young Master Claude won't have anything like the money he has anticipated. But there's lots of property, and he gets it all. Now mark me, Ralph, I think I see in this turn of affairs just the opportunity I have always wanted. There is nothing nicer for a lawyer than the handling of a big property for a reckless young spendthrift. I have planned to get the handling of the Rolff estate, and I have succeeded. The fact of there not being as much money as I expected is really in my favor. This boy Claude, I am certain, will be of a mind to spend money freely. I have talked with him, and he is eager to come into his fortune and has grand schemes of going to Europe, and becoming a gentleman. But the scapegrace won't have the money to carry out his plans. To gratify his desires, he must needs raise money on the property that will be left him. It is a fine chance for good bargains. With his inexperience and confiding nature, he can be led into almost any kind of an agreement. I have his confidence, I think, and it will be strange if there is not an opportunity afforded me for making a very good thing. Somebody is certain to take advantage of him, and why shouldn't I?"

"Why, be sure—why not?" echoed the young man.

"Why, well yet, Ralph," continued [illegible] there is a very fine moral point to consider in the matter. As I said—somebody will surely take advantage of this young man. Who shall it be? Now a man of weak mind might pause before taking advantage of such an opportunity. But why? It is plain that the young fool is bound to dissipate his fortune, and that it must of necessity fall into the hands of somebody. I cannot prevent him doing it. As executor, all I can do is to advise him. But advice, should I give it would only be wasted upon him. His is a nature not to take counsel of a disagreeable sort kindly. To give it, would only be to irritate him and forfeit his confidence. Well, shall I foolishly undertake to curb him in his set purposes, and thus forfeit his confidence, and allow some other and sharper person to usurp my place as legal adviser and reap the fruits of the transactions that there will be an opportunity to arrange? By no means. I can see no infraction of the moral law in managing a case of this kind. It is one of the legitimate perquisites of the legal profession. I can't help it if the young man throws his fortune away. I would be supremely foolish not to pick up what will naturally fall to my share. It is thus that Fortune restores a proper equilibrium, and decrees that the unworthy shall not long retain the possession of her favors. Do you see the point, Ralph?"

"Yes, father, I think I'm equal to seeing the drift of your argument," replied the young man.

"Well, Ralph, I'm glad of it. I'm rather proud of your intelligence. I think you will inherit my talent, but I trust you will never be forced to grub and toil as I have had to in order to make a reputation. In fact, my dear boy, what with my little savings, and the opportunity that is opened to me, I think I may reasonably look forward now to leaving you in pretty good circumstances. It only remains for you to aid my efforts by selecting a wife who will bring you a handsome dowry. And in this matter, my boy, I wish you to aim high. Don't imitate my unfortunate example of aiming too low at the outset of life. If I had married well off—and I don't wish to say a word against your mother, my boy, who was as desirable a wife in all except her fortune as anybody could wish for—if I had married well off, to what position of honor might I not have aspired! But talent allied to poverty has but a sorry show in this world, and if Fortune has deigned to throw a single smile upon me it is because of my ceaseless industry and perseverance. But to return to your affairs, Ralph. If, as I expect, we can get Claude out of the way after the old lady's death, it will leave the coast clear for you to lay siege to old Bruyn's daughter. Let me say to you, that she is by all odds the most desirable girl in these parts—the handsomest as well as the richest. Old Bruyn is very well off, and she is an only child. Young Rolff will probably soon forget her, after he gets off to Europe. Besides, her father loves money too well not to wish to make a good settlement for her, and if Master Claude scatters his money and we pick it up, our chances will be so much the better and his not worth considering. Moreover, the girl will be left without any gallant and any spruce young fellow ought soon to be able to console her and secure a transfer of her affections—eh, Ralph?"

"Well, father," replied the young man, "I have nothing against the girl except her excessively bad taste in ever having taken up with young Rolff, and I don't think it ought to be very hard to supplant him. With a good dowry, I think she would make me a very acceptable wife. I have nobody else on my list; so, if you wish that to be part of the little campaign you have been planning, I am agreeable."

"Well spoken, Ralph," exclaimed the fond parent. "This is indeed an auspicious day in the history of the Saybrooks. Just to celebrate the cheerful aspect of affairs, and to refresh us from our hard labors before supper, I think we may venture to have a little toddy. Just tap on the door, Ralph, and call Mrs. Grewy."

Ralph did as requested, and a small, faded, middle-aged lady soon appeared. This was Mr. Saybrook's housekeeper. Mrs. Grewy might have been pretty at the time of life when she won the bachelor affections of Mr. Grewy, the blacksmith, but care and widowhood had left their marks upon her. What was evident from her appearance was that she still considered herself attractive, and dressed after a more youthful fashion than her years really entitled her to. The cap on her head was smartly decked with ribbons, and her attire, though plain, was evidently cut to heighten her personal charms and make them appear youthful.

"A little warm water, if you please, Mrs. Grewy," said Mr. Saybrook.

"Certainly, sir," answered the widow, with a bewitching smile. "But is there not something else I can bring?"

"Nothing at all, Mrs. Grewy."

"Oh, but you must be hungry after a day's hard work, and it is two hours to supper time yet. I have some lovely cake, Mr. Saybrook, and, really, if I do say it myself, the apple pies I have been baking to-day are exquisite."

"Nothing but the water, Mrs. Grewy."

Defeated in her hospitable intentions, the widow fetched the water and retired.

Mr. Saybrook mixed himself a good stout toddy and Ralph a much weaker one, and the happy prospects of the Saybrook family were duly toasted and celebrated.

CHAPTER VI.

Rolff House was erected in the midst of a considerable park; but the shrubbery was grown wild and tangled the walks were neglected and overgrown with grass, and the whole appearance of the surroundings indicated lack of care and gradual decay. A number of large, venerable trees reared their, imposing forms amid the surrounding desolation, with somethting of an air of melancholy dignity. It seemed as if their great arms were raised up in mute protest at the decay of the former grandeur over which they had stood as sentinels.

The house itself was a large, many-windowed, many gabled structure, of stone, so solidly built that it seemed as if it might have been intended to defy even the hand of Time. But decay had set its marks upon it. The great roof was moss-covered, doors and shutters were warped and weather-stained; a number of windows were broken out; and about the whole place was the evidences of neglect which yet could not hide the imposing dignity of the old mansion. It was indeed a noble structure, too large and massive to ever look mean or undignified, and only growing more stately and picturesque in its decay.

Within there was plenty of evidence of former grandeur. The builder had been a man of taste, and, in furnishing his residence, had imported many costly and elegant articles from the old world. There were at least a score of rooms in the house, many of which were now vacant, and given up to dust and emptiness. A large hall ran through the centre of the house. Doors opened on either side into large rooms, which had formerly been used as the reception rooms of the mansion. These and adjoining rooms on the ground floor were now occupied by the few persons living in the house, and all were filled with massive furniture and many quaint and valuable articles. The rooms on the floors above were scarcely occupied at all, except in two or three cases as store-rooms.

In a large room, whose three windows looked to the east and south, lay the dying mistress of Rolff House. The apartment was large and quaintly furnished. The windows were shaded, so that the light was subdued, and the shadows lurking behind chairs and in the corners added to the mysterious solemnity of the apartment. In a large four-poster bed, with snowy pillows and counterpane, lay the invalid lady, unable to move hand or foot. The paralysis of age had smitten her frame, and it was only a question of a few days or hours when the vital spirit would escape its tenement. But her active mind was as clear as ever, and, at the threshhold of death, she was as interested in all household and business matters, and exercised the same supervision, as when she was in a state of perfect health.

As she lay thus stretched out in helplessness, the most casual glance could note that the features were those of a woman of keen intelligence and strong force of character. The face was rather long and narrow, the forehead high, the eyes deep-set, grey and keen, the nose prominent and almost Roman in shape, and the mouth and chin of a kind that indicated firmness and self poise. The hair was abundant, and partly concealed under a neat black lace cap.

Rolff House had few servants. Old Carl Krum performed the duties of man-of-all-work about the old place, having an assistant at the ferry, which he was getting too old to attend to exclusively. There was besides a kitchen maid, and a single old servant named Margaret, who had long been the companion of the mistress of the house. To this reduced state had Rolff House, which once boasted of a dozen servants and retainers, gradually descended. These faithful servitors were the only occupants of the house save Claude and his aunt.

Old Margaret was sitting quietly in a chair near one of the windows. The invalid had been lying with closed eyes apparently asleep. She opened them, and Margaret, who had been sitting with her eyes bent upon the Bible upon her lap, seemed to become instinctively aware that her attention was wanted, for she closed the book and turned her head toward the bed as if awaiting some message.

"Margaret, has Claude come in yet?"

The tones were clear and calm, though feeble.

"I saw him coming up the path but a moment ago, ma'am," answered Margaret, "and I thought I heard him go to his room."

"Go tell him to come to my room, and do not return yourself till I have dismissed him."

Margaret simply bent her head. She was accustomed to executing orders without waste of words. She went directly to Claude's room, and delivered the message.

Claude proceeded at once to his aunt's chamber. As he entered, she lay with closed eyes. So still and white did she appear in the half shadow of the room, that it needed no very lively imagination to be startled into a surmise that the form and features were those of a corpse. It was with a half-fear that his aunt's spirit had already flown, that Claude advanced with hushed heart and knelt beside the bed.

The old lady opened her eyes, and bent them upon him.

"It is you, Claude. Kiss me, my darling boy."

He did as requested, and as his lips touched the pale and cold face of his aunt, a pang of grief and contrition shot through his heart as he noted the expression of deep tenderness upon the wasted face.

"Come draw up a chair, and sit beside me, Claude. I have my dying wishes to communicate to you."

The young man drew up a chair and seated himself, and then his feelings gave way, and he bent his head to the bedside, and sobbed bitterly. It is thus that grief often takes the most careless heart unaware, and forces it to confess a weakness it did not dream of.

"My darling boy—my Claude!" The words came tenderly from the pale lips, and Claude wondered within himself that he had never before recognized the sweetness of his aunt's voice. "You will grieve a little while for me, Claude; but it will not be long. It is not the will of God that the old should be mourned for deeply. Rest awaiteth them, it is well they should pass away. Yes, it is well. I must soon go. At any time the chill of death may strike to my heart. I have waited too long ere saying what I have to say to you, Claude. Not till this day could I convince myself that my time had really come. But it is not too late. I am weak, but praise be to the Lord who giveth me strength to speak. Listen and mark well what I say, Claude. To you I have been but a foster mother. It was not my wish to manifest too deep tenderness for you. I knew the weak blood that is in your veins, and it has been my purpose to strengthen and prepare you for the responsibility soon to fall upon you. You are the only heir of Rolff House. When I pass away, all will be yours. I charge you first that you see that Carl and Margaret have a home here so long as either live. It is my wish that you be my only heir, therefore I have not provided for them in my will. My lawyer has been here to-day. All that is needed to be done has been properly executed to make you my heir. Mr. Saybrook I have appointed executor. He is worthy, and I wish you to seek his counsel after my death and follow it in all things where your own good judgment will not direct you. I have charged him with all that I wish done in a business way. He is wise and prudent, and you will do well to consult freely with him."

The old lady paused a few moments from fatigue, then she began speaking again in a feebler but distinct tone.

"On yonder table Claude, you will see a box with a key in it. Open it, and bring the sealed roll you will find in it."

Claude proceeded to the table, opened the box, and found in it a roll of paper, heavily sealed. He returned with it to his seat at the bedside.

"In that roll," continued his aunt, "is a written memorial I have had drawn up long in anticipation of this solemn moment. It contains that which it is important you should know but which it is not yet time to communicate to you. For reasons of deep importance, I do not wish you to open the roll except under certain express circumstances. On the first day of January, of each year, I wish you to go to the great vault door, in the south cellar. The key of the vault is in the box from which you took this roll. If, on the door of the vault, you see marked the sign of a cross in each of the four corners, you can open the roll, and learn the contents. Unless you find this sign, you must not open the roll till five years have elapsed, when all prohibition will cease. You are not to open the vault under any circumstances till you are acquainted with the contents of the roll. When you open the vault, if the inner door is locked, and the key not in it, you will have it broken open. Do you understand all this clearly?"

"I do, aunt; but it seems very strange and mysterious."

"For your full guidance, I have written all I have told you in the unsealed paper that is in the box. If you forget anything, refer to that to refresh your memory. I desire that every instruction I have given you be implicitly followed. I can trust you to do so. All that seems strange will be one day made clear. Soon I hope the mystery and shadow that have rested over Rolff House will be lifted. Wealth and happiness, I trust, will then be yours. One thing more you must promise me, Claude—never to sell or resign your interest in Rolff House. Do you promise!"

The words were uttered in still fainter, but very solemn tones.

The young man readily gave his promise.

"Sit by me yet a little while, my darling boy," she said in scarcely distinguishable tones.

She had closed her eyes. Claude remained seated in the solemn stillness of the room, while minute after minute slipped by. His aunt did not speak to him again. He waited patiently for her to bid him go. Still the moments slipped by, and no word or sign did he receive. At last he grew alarmed. He spoke to his aunt, but she did not answer. He rose up, and took her hand, but it was cold. He looked at her face, and saw it had the hue of death.

He was shocked and alarmed. He hastened from the room. He was free at last, and heir of Rolff House.

CHAPTER VII.

A fortnight had flown by. The days had been busy ones to Claude. He was tasting the first delightful draughts of perfect freedom of purpose and action. He had come into possession of his fortune. There were none to obstruct his plans—unless, indeed, Rosa's gentle warnings and admonitions could be called obstructions. His aunt was laid away in the burying-ground behind the old Dutch church. The first outburst of grief, not unmingled with remorse, was soon over; the sad offices to the dead were performed; and he was face to face with his new position as master of Rolff House. His naturally buoyant spirits soon rose to intoxication as he dwelt upon his plans and hopes for the future.

But soon Claude found that there were obstacles to be met, and unexpected difficulties to be overcome. His first disappointment came when he arrived at a knowledge of his aunt's will, and of the actual condition of her property, and it flashed upon him that he might be compelled to limit his grand expectations.

But Anthony Saybrook proved a ready comforter to him in this emergency. It was at his office that Claude first heard a clear [illegible] read and learned that he was not as rich as he had anticipated he would be.

"Ah, my dear young sir," the obsequious lawyer remarked, after Claude's expression of his disappointment, "this is not a matter for much regret. Why, you are heir of the finest property in this section, and, without a single cent in money, your fortune is a large one, and with judicious management can be made to yield you all the ready cash you can need."

"But I anticipated there was a large amount of money," replied Claude, with deep chagrin expressed in his countenance. "I am certain my aunt's revenues were large. She spent very little—in fact, as you know, was almost parsimonious. What can she have done with her money? It is a very strange thing."

"Strange, no doubt, my dear sir, and yet, perhaps, on consideration, we shall be able to see that it is not so surprising as it appears at first. We lawyers know well that heirs are commonly disappointed in the expected amounts of their fortunes. It is so easy to exaggerate any person's supposed wealth. Your aunt no doubt had large revenues. The business of the estate must necessarily have yielded considerable results. Still, business generally requires large outlays to conduct it, and your aunt was disposed to have her own way in managing her affairs, and, if I may be allowed to say so, it is probable that her business was not as well managed as it would have been if she had employed a trusty counsellor. I have lately had your aunt's confidence, as her lawyer and confidential adviser in drawing up her will, and she assured me that her revenues were barely enough to meet absolutely necessary expenses in taking care of all her large estate. This seems very natural to an experienced man of the world. Many of the wealthiest families of our land have nearly everything invested in their property, and it needs nearly all their revenues to keep up their estates."

This seemed reasonable if not very agreeable to Claude; but he thought of his aunt's dying charge to him, of the mysterious roll, and of the great stone vault in the south cellar, and he could not help connecting these things with the strange disappearance of his aunt's money. But of this he determined to say nothing to the lawyer. The latter, however, saw that something was on his mind, and endeavored to draw it out. Assuming his blandest manner, he said:

"The only way in which your aunt could have disposed of any surplus revenue would have been to have concealed it somewhere. In that case, she would naturally have left you some information on the subject. I am fully conversant with all her business, and know that there is no more money invested than is stated in the will. Did she have any communication with you in regard to her money?"

"She told me she had made a will, and that I was her heir," replied Claude, not without design of evading the question.

"If that is all, then it would seem to settle the question," continued the legal gentleman, with an air that seemed to indicate that he was not entirely satisfied that it was all. "There is nothing left us then but to make the best of things as they are. Now, what are your wishes as to the first steps to be taken, my dear sir?"

"You spoke of my ability to raise money on the property?" queried Claude.

"Yes, certainly," was the reply. "It is a matter that might be managed. Money is always to be had on good real estate. If it is your desire, my dear young friend, to use a portion of your fortune in travel and enjoyment, as it is very natural you should wish to do, why, I may venture to say—in fact, I think I can assure you—that I can put you in a way to procure it. Now, what are your ideas—your plans—your expectations, as it were, as to the amount of money you would like to use?"

Thus incited, Claude went into a lengthy statement of his plans for a long residence in Europe, for the study of art. He found no cold listener in the sympathetic Mr. Saybrook. That golden-hearted individual seemed to catch some of the young man's enthusiasm, and averred that he was delighted that he had such a noble ambition, and gave it his warmest approval. Moreover, he proceeded to show him how, by simply signing certain legal papers, he could procure certain sums of money on the mills, the buildings, the lands and other property of the Rolff estate.

"How soon could I get this money?" asked Claude.

"Why, in a few days, perhaps—that is, I speak on the supposition that you expect my aid in the matter."

"Certainly, certainly," replied the young man. "And not to waste words, I authorize you to proceed to find out at once what amounts of money you can raise on my property, and how soon it can be procured."

"Then you contemplate as speedy a departure as possible to the old world?" blandly inquired the smiling lawyer.

"There is but one thing to detain me a single week," replied the young man, "and that is the matter of—of—money, I was about to say; but I think now of another matter; I don't know—really, I would like to get off as soon as possible, but I am afraid this matter will detain me beyond the time I wish."

"Isn't it something that can be arranged so as to be entrusted to a second party?" inquired the lawyer in a tone that insinuated that almost any matter could be entrusted to a second party—so long as that party was himself."

Claude reflected long and deeply. Finally, he said:

"This matter troubles me. My aunt advised me, if I needed counsel, that I should apply to you. Perhaps if I state the circumstances, you could resolve my doubts. I feel that I can trust you even with so important and mysterious a matter as this."

Mr. Saybrook looked so profoundly sympathetic, wise and trustworthy, that Claude was encouraged, and revealed to him the whole matter in regard to his aunt's dying request, the mysterious roll, and his charge to be at the old vault door in the south cellar on the first day of each new year.

"I think I can throw a little light on this obscure matter," smilingly replied the lawyer. "Your aunt, as you know, had many peculiar views and strange whims. Now I have no doubt that she suspected your natural desire to travel when you came into your fortune. Such a purpose would hardly suit her thrifty views. I can see, in this instruction to visit the old cellar once a year a very nicely contrived plan to keep you from wandering far from Rolff House. Whatever else may be in the matter, this, I feel assured, is one object she had in view."

Claude colored. This view of the matter was so ingenious, and, he was fain to confess so much like his aunt, that for a moment he was angered at what he had considered such a mysterious and important matter turning out to be only a petty trick to control his actions after he supposed himself to be free to fulfill his hopes and ambition. He reflected for some time, and the more he considered the more evident it became to him that this was part at least of the object of his aunt in her mysterious dying request. Finally he spoke:

"What would you advise, Mr. Saybrook, in this dilemma? It seems a cruel and impossible thing for me to give up my plans of travel and art study. Yet this pledge I have given my aunt practically defeats my hopes for five years at least. I could not cross the ocean twice each year on such a mission as this. It would take half the time I desire to devote to my studies. Can you not afford me some escape from it?"

"Well, let us see—let us see," replied the lawyer, in tones whose smooth, cool assurance seemed to carry absolute conviction with them. "Your aunt, I am fully assured, was not a proper adviser for a young man in all things. She had arrived at a great age, and her natural mental eccentricities had been increased, till, in some things, she might be considered non compus mentis. I do not allege she was insane; there are degrees of mental alienation; many are practically of unsound mind on some one single point while preserving their general mental balance. This I take to have been your aunt's condition. Her intense interest in you and desire to insure what she considered your happiness no doubt led her to this ingenious but eccentric plan to secure your residence most of the time at Rolff House. Now, in the first place, there is no moral obligation in a promise given under a state of deception or to an incompetent person. Secondly, it does not appear that there is any real necessity for the fulfillment of the promise literally—else, why should there be the possible delay of five years in the denouement? Thirdly, there is scarcely any action of an individual that cannot be legally and sufficiently performed by a duly accredited agent. In view of these points, I think I can properly advise you that it is not necessary for you to personally fulfill your promise to your aunt on her death-bed. Still, to provide against any possible contingency, it would be well for you to appoint some competent person to represent you in the matter, who each new year could go to the vault and fulfill the duty of mere observation you are called upon to perform, and, in case of the appearance of the signs, could speedily inform you of the matter. In this way, you could carry out your fond hopes, as well as practically fulfill your promise to the dead."

Claude might have been able to see the sophistry of this argument if he had not been so intensely bent on his darling objects of ambition. As it was, it seemed to him the perfection of clear reasoning and good advice. He resolved to follow it. He naturally chose the wily Mr. Saybrook to be his agent in the matter, and after further conversation on the subject of raising money, retired with the firm resolve soon to be on his way to the old world.

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[To be continued.]