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Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo  
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm  
Garnett Engels Byron Schiller  
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka  
Cotton Dostoyevsky Hall  
Baum Henry Kipling Doyle Willis  
Leslie Dumas Flaubert Nietzsche Turgenev Balzac  
Stockton Vatsyayana Crane  
Burroughs Verne  
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch  
Homer Tolstoy Whittman  
Darwin Thoreau Twain  
Potter Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato Scott  
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# **No Clue A Mystery Story**

James Hay

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"NO CLUE!"

*A Mystery Story*

BY

JAMES HAY, Jr.

AUTHOR OF "THE WINNING CLUE,"  
"THE MELWOOD MYSTERY"



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TO  
WILLIAM ("BUCK") HAY

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[Pg 1]

**"NO CLUE!"**

**I**

## **THE GREY ENVELOPE**

Catherine Brace walked slowly from the mantel-piece to the open window and back again. Within the last hour she had done that many times, always to halt before the mantel and gaze at the oblong, grey envelope that leaned against the clock. Evidently, she regarded it as a powerful agency. An observer would have perceived that she saw tremendous things come out of it—and that she considered them with mingled satisfaction and defiance.

Her attitude, however, betrayed no hint of hesitation. Rather, the fixity of her gaze and the intensity of her mental concentration threw into high relief the hardness of her personality. She was singularly devoid of that quality which is generally called feminine softness.

And she was a forceful woman. She had power. It was in her lean, high-shouldered, ungraceful figure. It was in her thin, mobile lips [Pg 2] and her high-bridged nose with its thin, clean-cut nostrils. She impressed herself upon her environment. Standing there at the mantel, her hands clasped behind her, she was so caught up by the possibilities of the future that she succeeded in imparting to the grey envelope an almost animate quality.

She became aware once more of voices in the next room: a man's light baritone in protest, followed by the taunt of her daughter's laugh. Although she left the mantel with lithe, swift step, it was with unusual deliberation that she opened the communicating door.

Her voice was free of excitement when, ignoring her daughter's caller, she said:

"Mildred, just a moment, please."

Mildred came in and closed the door. Her mother, now near the window across the room, looked first at her and then at the grey envelope.

"I thought," Mrs. Brace said, "you'd forgotten you were going to mail it."

"Why didn't you mail it yourself?" The tone of that was cool insolence.

Mother and daughter were strikingly alike—hair piled high in a wide wave above the forehead; black eyes too restless, but of that gleaming brilliance which heralds a refusal to grow old. So far, however, the daughter's features had not assumed an aspect of sharpness, like the [Pg 3] mother's. One would have appraised the older woman vindictive—malevolent, possibly.

But in the younger face the mouth greatly softened, almost concealed, this effect of calculating hardness. Mildred Brace's lips had a softness of line, a vividness of colouring that indicated emotional depths utterly foreign to her mother.

They bore themselves now as if they commented on a decision already reached, a momentous step to which they had given immense consideration.

"I didn't mail it," Mrs. Brace answered her daughter's query, "because I knew, if you mailed it, you'd do as you'd said you wanted to do."

There was frank emphasis on the "said."

"Your feet don't always follow your intelligence, you know."

"I've been thinking about the thing," Mildred retorted, looking over her mother's shoulder into the summer night. "What's the use?"

"What's the use!" Mrs. Brace echoed, incredulous.

"Just that."

"We've been all over it! You know what it means to you—to both of us."

They spoke in low tones, careful that the man in the living room should not hear.

[Pg 4]

"My dear mother," Mildred said, with a return of her cool insolence, "you display a confidence hardly warranted by your—and our—man-experience."

She yawned slightly.

There was a harsher note in her mother's reply.

"He can't refuse. He can't!"

Mildred stared at the grey envelope a full three minutes. Mrs. Brace, wordless, showing no uneasiness as to the outcome, waited for her to speak.

"It's no use, mother," she said at last. "We can't manage it—him—this thing. It's too late."

The flat finality, the dreariness, of that announcement angered the older woman. Calmness fell from her. She came away from the window slowly, her hands clasped tightly at her back, the upper part of her body bending forward a little, her thin nostrils expanding and contracting to the force of her hurried breathing like leaves shaken in the wind. The curl of her thin lips added a curious ferocity to the words that passed them. She spoke, only when her face was within a few inches of Mildred's.

"No use!" she said contemptuously, her lowered voice explosive with passion. "Why? And why too late? Have you no self-respect, no will, no firmness? Are you all jelly and — —"

[Pg 5]

She got hold of herself with remarkable effectiveness, throwing off the signs of her wrath as suddenly as they had appeared. She retreated a step and laughed, without mirth.

"Oh, well," she said, "it's your party, not mine, after all. But, in future, my dear, don't waste your time and mine in school-girl heroics."

She completed her retreat and stood again at the window. Her self-restraint was, in a way, fiercer than her rage—and it affected her daughter.

"You see," she concluded, "why I didn't mail it. I knew you wouldn't do the very thing you'd outlined."

Mildred looked at the envelope again. The pause that followed was broken by the man in the other room.

"Mildred," he called.

Mrs. Brace laughed silently. Mildred, seeing that ridicule, recoiled.

"What are you laughing at?" she demanded.

Her mother pointed to the communicating door.

"I was thinking of *that*," she said, "for life—and," she looked toward the grey envelope, "the other thing."

"I don't see— —" Mildred began, and checked herself, gazing again at the envelope.

Her mother turned swiftly and stood looking [Pg 6] into the night. The man called again and was not answered. The two women were motionless. There was no sound in the room, save the ticking of the clock on the mantel. Two minutes passed—three.

Mildred went toward the mantel, put out her hand, withdrew it. She became conscious of the excessive heat and touched her forehead with her handkerchief. She glanced at her mother's motionless figure, started to speak, closed her parted lips. Indecision shook her. She put out her hand again, picked up the envelope and stood tapping it against her left palm.

Mrs. Brace, without moving, spoke at last:

"It's a few minutes of twelve. If you catch the midnight collection, he'll get it, out there, by five o'clock tomorrow afternoon."

There was another pause.

Mildred went slowly to the door leading into the living room, and once more she was on the point of speaking.

Mrs. Brace was drumming her fingers on the window ledge. The action announced plainly that she had finished with the situation. Mildred put her hand on the knob, pulled the door half-open, closed it again.

"I've changed my mind," she said, dreariness still in her voice. "He can't refuse."

Her mother made no comment.

[Pg 7]

Mildred went into the living room.

"Gene," she said, with that indifference of tone which a woman employs toward a man she despises, "I'm going down to mail this."

"Well, I'll swear!" he quarrelled sullenly. "Been in there all this time writing to him!"

"Yes! Look at it!" she taunted viciously, and waved the envelope before his eyes. "Sloanehurst!"

Taking up his hat, he went with her to the elevator.

[Pg 8]

## II

### THE WOMAN ON THE LAWN

Mr. Jefferson Hastings, unsuspecting that he was about to be confronted with the most brutal crime in all his experience, regretted having come to "Sloanehurst." He disapproved of himself unreservedly. Clad in an ample, antique night-shirt, he stood at a window of the guest-room assigned to him and gazed over the steel rims of his spectacles into the hot, rainy night. His real vision, however, made no attempt to pierce the outer darkness. His eyes were turned inward, upon himself, in derision of his behaviour during the past three hours.

A kindly, reticent gentleman, who looked much older than his fifty-three years, he made it his habit to listen rather than talk. His wide fame as a criminologist and consulting detective had implanted no egotism in him. He abhorred the spotlight.

But tonight Judge Wilton, by skilful use of query, suggestion and reminder, had tempted [Pg 9] him into talking "shop." He had been

lured into the rôle of monologist for the benefit of his host, Arthur Sloane. He had talked brilliantly, at length, in detail, holding his three hearers in spellbound and fascinated interest while he discoursed on crimes which he had probed and criminals whom he had known.

Not that he *thought* he had talked brilliantly! By no means! He was convinced that nine-tenths of the interest manifested in his remarks had been dictated by politeness. Old Hastings was just that sort of person; he discounted himself. He was in earnest, therefore, in his present self-denunciation. He sighed, remembering the volume of his discourse, the awful length of time in which he had monopolized the conversation.

But his modesty was not his only admirable characteristic. He had, also, a dependable sense of humour. It came to his relief now — he thought of his host, a chuckle throttling the beginnings of a second sigh deep down in his throat.

This was not the first time that Arthur Broughton Sloane had provoked a chuckle, although, for him, life was a house of terror, a torture chamber constructed with fiendish ingenuity. Mr. Sloane suffered from "nerves." He was spending his declining years in the [Pg 10] arduous but surprisingly successful task of being wretched, irritable and ill-at-ease.

The variety of his agonies was equalled only by the alacrity with which he tested every cure or remedy of which he happened to hear. He agreed enthusiastically with his expensive physicians that he was neurasthenic, psychasthenic and neurotic.

His eyes were weak; his voice was weak; his spirit was weak. He shivered all day with terror at the idea of not sleeping at night. Every evening he quivered with horror at the thought of not waking up next morning. And yet, despite these absorbing, although not entirely delightful, preoccupations, Mr. Sloane was not without an object in life.

In fact, he had two objects in life: the happiness of his daughter, Lucille, and the study of crime and criminals. The latter interest had brought Hastings to the Sloane country home in Virginia. Judge

Wilton, an old friend of the wrecked and wealthy Mr. Sloane, had met the detective on the street in Washington and urged:

"Go down to Sloanehurst and spend Saturday night. I'll be there when you arrive. Sloane's got his mind set on seeing you; and you won't regret it. His library on criminology will be a revelation, even to you."

[Pg 11]

And Hastings, largely because he shrank from seeming ungracious, had accepted Mr. Sloane's subsequent invitation.

Climbing now into the old-fashioned four-poster bed, he thought again of his conversation-spree and longed for self-justification. He sat up, sheetless, reflecting:

"As a week-ender, I'm a fine old chatter-box! — But young Webster got me! What did he say? — 'The cleverer the criminal, the easier to run him down. The thug, acting on the spur of the moment, with a blow in the dark and a getaway through the night, leaves no trace behind him. Your "smart criminal" always overreaches himself.' — A pretty theory, but wild. Anyway, it made me forget myself; I talked my old fool head off."

He felt himself blush.

"Wish I'd let Wilton do the disproving; he was anxious enough."

A mental picture of Sloane consoled him once more.

"Silk socks and gingham gumption!" he thought. "But he's honest in his talk about being interested in crime. The man loves crime! — Good thing he's got plenty of money."

He fell asleep, in a kind of ruminative growl:

[Pg 12]

"Made a fool of myself — babbling about what *I* remembered — what *I* thought! I'll go back to Washington — in the morning."

Judge Wilton's unsteady voice, supplemented by a rattling of the doorknob, roused him. He had thrust one foot out of bed when Wilton came into the room.

"Quick! Come on, man!" the judge instructed, and hurried into the hall.

"What's wrong?" Hastings demanded, reaching for his spectacles.

Wilton, on his way down the stairs, flung back:

"A woman hurt — outside."

From the hall below came Mr. Sloane's high-pitched, complaining tones:

"Unfathomable angels! What do you say? — Who?"

Drawing on shoes and trousers, the detective overtook his host on the front verandah and followed him down the steps and around the northeast corner of the house. He noticed that Sloane carried in one hand an electric torch and in the other a bottle of smelling salts. It was no longer raining.

Rounding the corner, they saw, scarcely fifteen yards from the bay-window of the ballroom, the upturned face of a woman who lay prostrate on the lawn. Lights had been turned on in the [Pg 13] house, making a glow which cut through the starless night.

The woman did not move. Judge Wilton was in the act of kneeling beside her.

"Hold on!" Hastings called out. "Don't disturb her — if she's dead."

"She is dead!" said Wilton.

"Who is she?" The detective, trying to find signs of life, put his hand over her heart.

"I don't know," Wilton answered the question. "Do you, Sloane?"

"Of course, I don't!"

Hastings said afterwards that Sloane's reply expressed astonished resentment that he should be suspected of knowing anybody vulgar enough to be murdered on his lawn.

The detective drew back his hand. His fingers were dark with blood.

At that moment Berne Webster, Lucille Sloane's fiancé, came from the rear of the house, announcing breathlessly:

"No 'phone connection—this time of night, judge.—It's past midnight.—I sent chauffeur—Lally—for the sheriff."

Hastings stood up, his first, cursory examination concluded.

"No doubt about it," he said. "She's dead.—Bring a blanket, somebody!"

Mr. Sloane's nerves had the best of him by [Pg 14] this time. He trembled like a man with a chill, rattling the bottle of smelling salts against the metal end of his electric torch. He had on slippers and a light dressing gown over his pajamas.

Wilton was fully dressed, young Webster collarless but wearing a black, light-weight lounging jacket. Hastings was struck with the different degrees of their dress, or undress.

"Who found her?" he asked, looking at Webster.

"Judge Wilton—and I," said Webster, so short of breath that his chest heaved.

"How long ago?"

Wilton answered that:

"A few minutes, hardly five minutes. I ran in to call you and Sloane."

"And Mr.—you, Mr. Webster?"

"The judge told me to—to get the sheriff—by telephone."

Hastings knelt again over the woman's body.

"Here, Mr. Sloane," he ordered, "hold that torch closer, will you?"

Mr. Sloane found compliance impossible. He could not steady his hand sufficiently.

"Hold that torch, judge," Hastings prompted.

"It's knocked me out—completely," Sloane said, surrendering the torch to Wilton.

Webster, the pallor still on his face, a look of horror in his eyes, stood on the side of the [Pg 15] body opposite the detective. At brief intervals he raised first one foot, then the other, clear of the ground

and set it down again. He was unconscious of making any movement at all.

Hastings, thoroughly absorbed in the work before him, went about it swiftly, with now and then brief, murmured comment on what he did and saw. Although his ample night-shirt, stuffed into his equally baggy trousers, contributed nothing but comicality to his appearance, the others submitted without question to his domination. There was about him suddenly an atmosphere of power that impressed even the little group of awe-struck servants who stood a few feet away.

"Stabbed," he said, after he had run his hands over the woman's figure; "died instantly—must have. Got her heart.—Young—not over twenty-five, would you say?—Not dead long.—Anybody call a doctor?"

"I told Lally to stop by Dr. Garnet's house and send him—at once," Webster said, his voice low, and broken. "He's the coroner, too."

Hastings continued his examination. The brief pause that ensued was broken by a woman's voice:

"Pauline! Pauline!"

The call came from one of the upstairs [Pg 16] windows. Hearing it, a woman in the servant group hurried into the house.

Webster groaned: "My God!"

"Frantic fiends! It gets worse and worse!" Sloane objected shrilly. "My nerves! And Lucille's annoyed—shocked!"

He held the smelling bottle to his nose, breathing deeply.

"Here! Take this!" Hastings directed, and put up his hand abruptly.

Sloane had so gone to pieces that the movement frightened him. He stepped back in such obvious terror that a hoarse guffaw of involuntary ridicule escaped one of the servants. The detective, finding that his kneeling posture made it difficult to put his handkerchief back into his trousers pocket, had thrust it toward Sloane.

That gentleman having so suddenly removed himself out of reach, Hastings stuck the handkerchief into Judge Wilton's coat-pocket.

Arthur Sloane, the detective said later, never forgave him that unexpected wave of the handkerchief—and the servant's ridiculing laugh.

Hastings looked up to Wilton.

"Did you find any weapon?"

"I didn't look—didn't take time."

"Neither did I," young Webster added.

Hastings, disregarding the wet grass, was on his hands and knees, searching. He [Pg 17] accomplished a complete circuit of the body, his round-shouldered, stooping figure making grotesque, elephantine shadows under the light of the torch as he moved about slowly, not trusting his eyes, but feeling with his hands every inch of the smallest, half-lit spaces.

Nobody else took part in the search. Having accepted his leadership from the outset, they seemed to take it for granted that he needed no help. Mentally benumbed by the horror of the tragedy, they stood there in the quiet, summer night, barren of ideas. They were like children, waiting to be instructed.

Hastings stood erect, pulling and hauling at his trousers.

"Can't find a knife or anything," he said. "Glad I can't. Hope he took it with him."

"Why?" asked Sloane, through chattering teeth.

"May help us to find him—may be a clue in the end."

He was silent a moment, squinting under the rims of his spectacles, looking down at the figure of the dead woman. He had already covered the face with the hat she had worn, a black straw sailor; but neither he nor the others found it easy to forget the peculiar and forbidding expression the features wore, even in death. It was partly fear, partly defiance—as if her last [Pg 18] conscious thought had been a flitting look into the future, an exulting recognition of the certain consequences of the blow that had struck her down.

Put into words, it might have been: "You've murdered me, but you'll pay for it—terribly!"

A servant handed Hastings the blanket he had ordered. He looked toward the sky.

"I don't think it will rain any more," he said. "And it's best to leave things as they are until the coroner arrives.—He'll be here soon?"

"Should get here in half an hour or so," Judge Wilton informed him.

The detective arranged the blanket so that it covered the prone form completely, leaving the hat over the face as he had first placed it. With the exception of the hat, he had disturbed no part of the apparel. Even the folds of the raincoat, which fell away from the body and showed the rain-soaked black skirt, he left as he had found them. The white shirtwaist, also partly exposed now, was dry.

"Anybody move her hat before I came out?" he asked; "you, judge; or you, Mr. Webster?"

They had not touched it, they said; it was on the grass, beside her head, when they discovered the body, and they had left it there.

Again he was silent, brows drawn together as he stood over the murdered woman. Finally, [Pg 19] he raised his head swiftly and, taking each in turn, searched sharply the countenances of the three men before him.

"Does—didn't anybody here know this woman?" he asked.

Berne Webster left his place at the opposite side of the body and came close to Hastings.

"I know who she is," he said, his voice lower even than before, as if he wished to keep that information from the servants.

Hastings' keen scrutiny had in it no intimation of surprise. Waiting for Webster to continue, he was addressed by the shivering Mr. Sloane:

"Mr. Hast—Mr. Hastings, take charge of—of things. Will you? You know about these things."

The detective accepted the suggestion.

"Suppose we get at what we know about it—what we all know. Let's go inside." He turned to the servants: "Stay here until you're called. See that nothing is disturbed, nothing touched."

He led the way into the house. Sloane, near collapse, clung to one of Judge Wilton's broad shoulders. It was young Webster who, as the little procession passed the hatrack in the front hall, caught up a raincoat and threw it over the half-clad Hastings.

[Pg 20]

### III

## THE UNEXPECTED WITNESS

In the library Hastings turned first to Judge Wilton for a description of the discovery of the body. The judge was in better condition than the others for connected narrative, Arthur Sloane had sunk into a morris chair, where he sighed audibly and plied himself by fits and starts with the aroma from the bottle of smelling salts. Young Webster, still breathing as if he had been through exhausting physical endeavour, stood near the table in the centre of the room, mechanically shifting his weight from foot to foot.

Wilton, seated half-across the room from Hastings, drew, absently, on a dead cigar-stump. A certain rasping note in his voice was his only remaining symptom of shock. He had the stern calmness of expression that is often seen in the broad, irregularly-featured face in early middle age.

"I can tell you in very few words," he said, addressing the detective directly. "We all left this room, you'll remember, at eleven o'clock. [Pg 21] I found my bedroom uncomfortable, too warm. Besides, it had stopped raining. When I noticed that, I decided to go out and smoke my good-night cigar. This is what's left of it."

He put a finger to the unlighted stump still between his lips.

"What time did you go out?" asked Hastings.

"Probably, a quarter of an hour after I'd gone upstairs—fifteen or twenty minutes past eleven, I should guess."

"How did you go out—by what door?"

"The front door. I left it unlocked, but not open. At first I paced up and down, on the south side of the house, under the trees. It was reasonably light there then—that is to say, the clouds had thinned a little, and, after my eyes had got accustomed to it, I had no trouble in avoiding the trees and shrubbery.

"Then a cloud heavier than the others came up, I suppose. Anyway, it was much darker. There wasn't a light in the house, except in my room and Berne Webster's. Yours was out, I remember. I passed by the front of the house then, and went around to the north side. It was darker there, I thought, than it had been under the trees on the south side."

"How long had you been out then, altogether?"

"Thirty or forty minutes." He looked at his [Pg 22] watch. "It's a quarter past twelve now. Let me see. I found the body a few minutes after I changed over to the north side. I guess I found it about five minutes before midnight—certainly not more than twenty minutes ago."

Hastings betrayed his impatience only by squinting under his spectacles and down the line of his nose, eyeing Wilton closely.

"All right, judge! Let's have it."

"I was going along slowly, very slowly, not doing much more than feeling my way with my feet on the close-shaven grass. It was the darkest night I ever saw. Literally, I couldn't have seen my hand in front of me.

"I had decided to turn about and go indoors when I was conscious of some movement, or slight sound, directly in front of me, and downward, at my feet. I got that impression."

"What movement? You mean the sound of a fall?"

"No; not that exactly."

"A footstep?"