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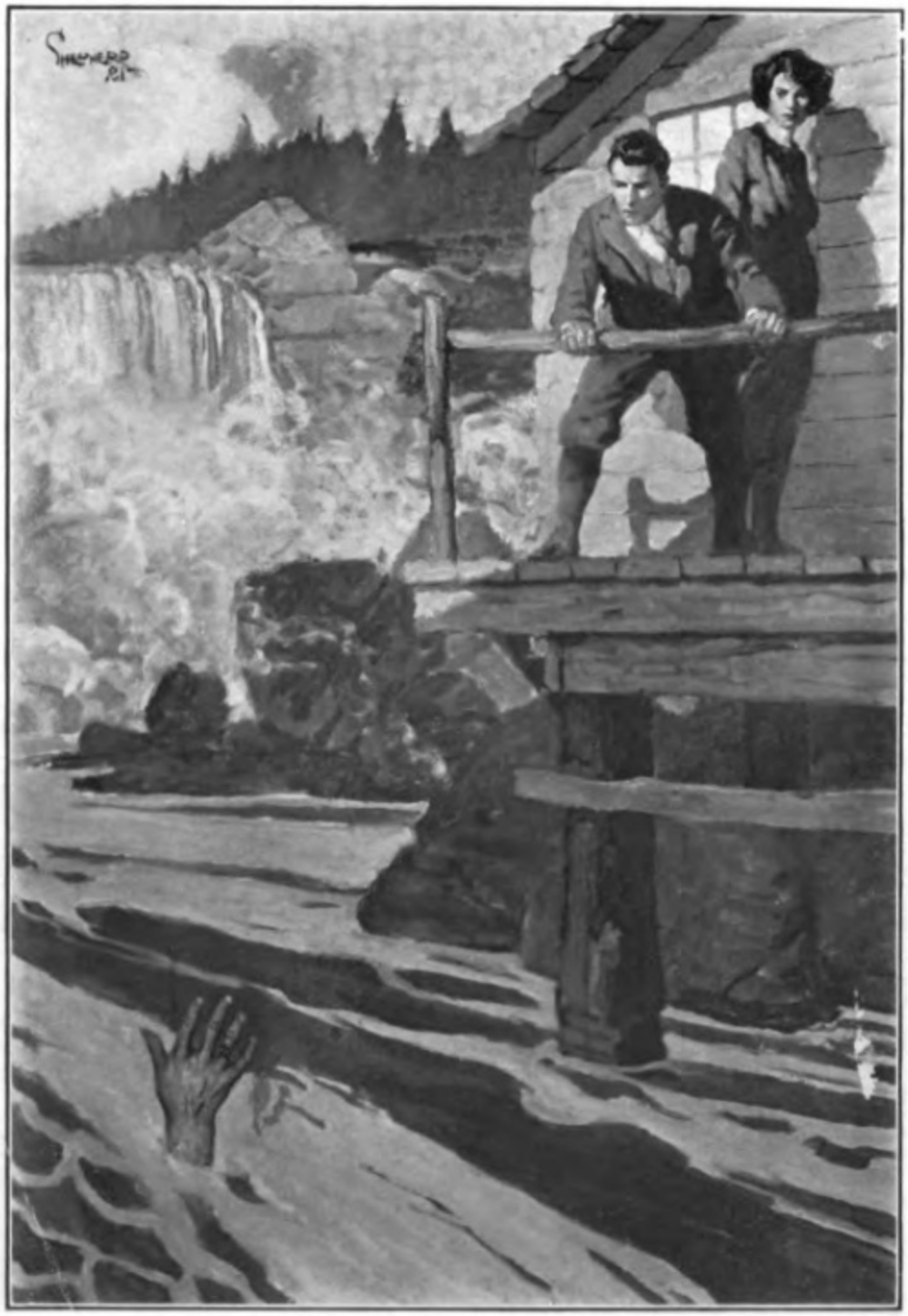

A HAND AND FOREARM THRUST UPWARD IN WHAT SEEMED A GESTURE OF DEFIANCE

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The Body in the Blue Room

By

SIDNEY WILLIAMS

Frontispiece by

J. CLINTON SHEPHERD

THE PENN PUBLISHING COMPANY PHILADELPHIA

1922

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To the
Memory of Lina
A Lamp in the Darkness

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The Body in the Blue Room

CHAPTER I

NATURE SETS A SCENE

SOMEWHERE in the woods an owl's hoot rent the quiet air. The night absorbed it, and resumed its self-communing. With the whispering of myriad leaves mingled faint stirring of dreaming birds, and murmurs of the insect kingdom.

A queen of serene majesty, the harvest moon rose, leisurely and golden, and marked the dark line of far-flung trees that raised their lances on the rugged hills. In close array they swept to the shore of a cradled lake. Turquoise in vanished sunlight, it had retired to rest under its satin blanket, with the sheen of jewels where moonbeams tarried, casually at play.

Again, and nearer, an owl cried harshly. For a moment its dark outline was clear against the sky. Then it came heavily to earth at the edge of a road winding ribbon-like to the great gray house overlooking the lake and forest aisles. Again quiet reigned in the darkness of trees that pressed the macadam stretch on either side, as if jealous of man's intrusion.

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CHAPTER II

THE BOX OF THE GOLDEN SERPENTS

NATURE going her steady way without. Man following devices of the heart within. As tenaciously as his grandfather, who imparted to Oakhurst its distinguished ugliness, had maintained no gentleman dined after six, Alfred Carrington contended that no civilized person would dine before eight.

He sat at the head of the table, dark and spare, with an expression of irony radiating from heavy-lidded eyes. As model Americans consecrate themselves to accumulation of a fortune, or a paragraph in "Who's Who," Carrington had devoted his life to pleasure. Monte Carlo and Paris knew him as a princely spender. And to the beggar of Naples he was more profitable than a season's total of German tourists.

Carringtons had adorned public life, founded libraries, and braced the pillars of art. To Alfred the estate of leading citizen was anathema. Of two things he was proud. The array of silver attesting his prowess on the polo field, and his reputation in numismatic circles as a collector of coins and jewels.

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The woman facing him down the long avenue of candles seemed an admirable mate. Helen Carrington was dressed that night in black velvet, with a collar of diamonds, camellias at her belt, and a single white flower in the abundance of her dark hair. A tall woman, with a figure Zenobia might have envied, so supple it was and strong. And a proud carriage of the head inclined with affection to Richard Marston, as he argued with fervor the grievance of half-starved strikers in some East Side trade dispute.

"The Crusading Blackstone" was Marston's nickname, coined by another lawyer, who added an offhand compliment: "It's inexpensively refreshing to know a fellow who thinks about chivalry, while all the rest of us think about checks."

"You would make a good actor, Dick," said Helen Carrington irrelevantly, watching the play of feeling in his lean, keen face.

Checked in full flight, Marston dropped his theme. "Sorry I bored you," he said with a look of mingled defiance and contrition. "Let's talk about something else."

Mirth peeped from her eyes, and hovered at the corners of her generously cut mouth. In silence she took from her hair the white camellia, and fixed it in the lapel of his coat with a little pat. Then she spoke with winning softness.

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"Tell me, Dick. Do you care so much about everybody's wrongs?"

"Why ——" he began, then looked at her half-suspicious. "It's only this," he went on. "Some things one can't be indifferent to, if he has a heart in his breast. Women in your position have no comprehension of them."

"I have known hard times," she submitted.

"Yes," he said ironically. "Once your personal allowance was cut to ten thousand a year."

"Anyway, I'm a democrat, Dicky."

"Is any woman a democrat?"

He regained for the moment something of the advocate's fervor.

"I think you are all too completely swayed by the personal to entertain a true conception of equality. Take your own case. You like to reflect that you equally enjoy the conversation of an amusing bootblack and a cosmopolitan grand duke. You ignore social classification; but you don't forget it. You're a dear, Helen. But not a democrat."

She made obeisance with an inclination of her head.

"At least, I'm a good friend. To continue our tête-à-tête. Since," with a careless glance about the table, "such conversation seems in general favor. Let's talk about Carlotta."

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Marston flushed, but allowed his eyes open enjoyment of oblivious beauty, as Carlotta Hamlin gave ear to the studious gallantries of Freddy Graves. Her piquant profile crowned with darkly auburn hair was clear against the shadowy green of tapestry. Eyes into which Freddy gazed with amiable ardor Marston could not see. But he knew them well. Eyes of gray that had a trick of sometimes seeming hazel. The truthful mirrors of a personality elfish, comradely, or icy,—as the mood might be. At all times Carlotta possessed the interest of the unexpected.

"She is quite a puzzle," said Marston, lighting a cigarette with elaborate unconcern.

Mrs. Carrington smiled. "I suppose that is your legal mind, Dick. What I had in view was your personal impression. You and Carlotta have been here together nearly a week. And you know, even if I'm not a democrat, or open-eyed to sorrows of the poor, I am not altogether blind.

"I have known you," she went on musingly, "since your nurse, or mine, took us out to walk and wiped our little noses. And I have known Carlotta since we were together in a Paris convent, with no higher aim than cultivation of a French accent and a pure heart. I know you both so well, and am so fond of you, that I will take the risk of being misunderstood."

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"Well?"

Marston was watching bubbles rise through the clear amber of his freshly filled glass. For a minute or so they sat in silence. About them flowed the tide of conversation, blending of anecdote for all with a confidential hum. Then Helen Carrington resumed:

"Carlotta is my dearest friend. We don't think alike. And few of our intimates are mutual possessions. Since we married we have both been wanderers; and it happened our paths seldom crossed. Our last meeting before this visit was in Rome, a year ago. But the tie remains unbroken. I've a feeling that Carlotta would come to me any time, and anywhere, if I needed her. And however wrong I might be, she would try to help me. There is plenty of firmness and loyalty under her capricious exterior."

She paused; but Marston said nothing.

"One might suppose I was egging you on to propose." She surveyed his averted face quizzically. "What I want to suggest is that Carlotta's loyalty is to friendship. Not that she is incapable of caring for a man. To one who mastered and really understood her, she would be wonderful, dear beyond description.

"But they try—and fail," she went on. "Jim Hamlin was a good fellow who loved her too much,

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and understood her too little. A railroad accident ended his painful bewilderment. Carlotta has had her fancies since then. But they stopped short of matrimony. For two weeks she might be jealous of your shaving-brush, Dicky. After that you might cease to exist to her."

"Thanks," Marston said stiffly, and drained his glass.

"Nonsense, Dick."

She touched his arm in protest.

"You mustn't be angry. I don't think she would treat you as a trifle. She likes you now; and I'm not blind to your feeling for her. But I am a little afraid for you both. Selfish, too, I suppose. I've usually found that in the marriage of friends I save at best two acquaintances. I don't want to lose what I have in you and Carlotta by a rash experiment."

"I know one you wouldn't lose, Helen."

Clouds past, he turned to her with a quick smile, like a sudden flooding of sunlight. It was an expression his friends loved.

"And since you told me more than I dared to ask, I've a compliment for you."

"Oh, tell me." She was eagerly attentive now. "And you've kept it from me—how long? You can't realize," with mock seriousness, "how bitter it is, Dicky, to be old and neglected."

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"It's a double compliment," he bantered.

"You extravagant creature. Begin at once."

"Well," he said magisterially, "it's a compliment that I tell you at all."

"Ah, a tribute to my common sense. Now come to the purely feminine."

"Well," pulling reflectively at his cigarette, "I will tell you. As you came down to dinner, I happened to see you pause a moment on the landing. And it popped into my head that you might have posed for Beardsley's Herodias. No literal resemblance, of course. You know the one I mean. In the Salome series?"

"Yes, I know it." Her face showed mirthful appreciation. "Tall, and so majestic. With a broad black girdle, and the flowing black mane. And the handmaiden who clasps a powder-puff to her breast, while holding in her other hand what looks like a fat 8. And a bald gentleman with a necklace, and the look of an outraged butler, supports a corner of Herodias's robe."

At his expression of chagrin she laughed in pure enjoyment.

"Don't be alarmed, Dicky. I like it. It's one of Beardsley's few figures that look like anybody. And anyway, he's a fillip to people of our sort,—a little too far from the primal thing. I'd like to know Verlaine's Pierrot:

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" Le subtil génie
De sa malice infinie
De poète—grimacier ——"

" You're a queer prètender, Helen," said Marston, all sincerity again. " While most of us play up to the crowd, you only recognize its existence by running yourself down."

" How do you know? " she countered. " What does any man know about any woman? Why, we don't know all about ourselves. But I ought to be charitable to you, Dicky. You have furnished—unintentionally—a bright suggestion for tableaux.

" I am already cast for Herodias. And picture Alfred, sick with passion for young beauty, regarding me with smouldering eyes. Poor dear. I've never checked him at all. And he's wandered,—so far, he shows signs now of regarding me as the divine mystery."

" Sure you're not giving secrets away? " asked Marston.

" By no means. For you don't believe me. Let's get back to our tableaux. Who shall be Salome? We can't use Amy Stone, even if we have the heart to take her away from Roger Vincent, who generally finds the quarrel between their mothers a barrier almost as effective as a quarantine for dis-

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ease. Amy is nice with children and dogs, and charmingly considerate with old people. And she can drive a car or golf ball even to the satisfaction of Roger. Devotion to physical perfection is his substitute for religion. Amy might do for the Goddess of Liberty. But her dance of the Seven Veils must certainly be reserved for the variety stage."

"There's Fanny Cutshaw," he somewhat satirically proposed.

Helen's eyes wandered to a short, slender woman, with delicate features and vehemently golden hair. Her dress, which seemed to Marston more like a lounging robe than a dinner gown, was fashioned of some Eastern fabric, with serpents of gold writhing their way across a wisteria background. As she gesticulated freely the topaz in a ring on the little finger of her left hand shone yellow. Catching the light, it seemed somehow baleful, like the eye of a snake that is as cold as ice. She was exercising slightly faded blue eyes on General Welles, who bent toward her with his gallantry for all women.

Mrs. Carrington came back to her vis-à-vis.

"'Many a true word is spoken in jest.' Fanny could do the Salome dance. You don't like her, do you, Dicky? And I think just now she sighs for you."

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"Nonsense," he said, and added defensively, "With other friends of sufficient standing, perhaps, to venture an opinion, I don't see where she fits in. She isn't your kind."

"No, I don't suppose she is. If you want to analyze it, her claim on me is the weakness of gratitude. I can't forget favors offered in pure amiability to a stranger. That was my first meeting with Fanny,—on a steamer in the Bay of Biscay. For once, a slip-up left me with poor accommodation. I had a wretched little stateroom, and I was ill. When a woman, hardly a deck acquaintance, insisted on my transfer to her comfortable room, and hovered over me more assiduously than Fifi, who got all my discarded hats and gowns, I couldn't be ungrateful. And afterward, when I was in a Paris hospital, she brought me roses every day.

"So, you see, I'm helpless. Fanny says I am the light of her life. To be honest, I suppose I am her ticket of admission to what is called 'smart society.' I don't mind that, if my friends behave well to her.

"She has had a wretched enough life. Her father was an English curate, appropriately poor. At a tender age, as the old stories say, she was handed over to a London diamond merchant. I don't know what became of him. Fanny is rather

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reticent on a few subjects. Anyway, she became one of the wandering sisterhood of the Continent. You have seen them in the hotels of Ostend and Paris, in Baden Baden and the Savoy grill. They know everybody by sight, and collect authoritative back-stairs information. Their whole life is a painful pretense that deceives nobody.

"Fanny's only deep attachment was to some Indian of high rank—a Parsee, I think—with whom she spent much time in the Orient. Even there she was declassée. For in India his code of caste left her less than the position of chèrie amie in Europe. You see, she has had an unhappy life. With it all, she is sweet at heart, and so grateful for a little kindness. Am I forgiven, Dicky?"

"Please forgive me," he said impulsively. "You know what I really think of you, Helen. You've more heart than a dozen pious phrase-makers. For your sake, I'll stand on my head to give Fanny a good time."

"Not every one," she said with a rueful smile, "is so noble. Right now Carlotta is showing signs of temper."

In a lull of conversation her voice came to them, with an accent of boredom.

"No, Mrs. Cutshaw," she was saying, "I don't know her. We don't seem to have many mutual friends, do we?"

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Mrs. Carrington reached for her handkerchief, and a spangled fan.

"My cue for exit," she observed. "I must take the debaters away before Carlotta does something worse. And she'll have to—to make Fanny recognize the snub. Stay here and smoke in peace. How I envy men the privilege of settling differences with their fists. We poor creatures can only battle with our tongues."

She gave the signal to rise. The distaff diners disappeared, with a little preening and the haphazard conversation that supports passage from room to room. The men settled back comfortably in the camaraderie of social undress. Maxwell, the perfect butler of clerical aspect, responded to Carrington's pressure of a button with cigars.

"You should be photographed now, Freddy," observed Carrington. "Your spiritual expression would go well with those songs that make you rich. What's the latest? 'Don't Peroxide Your Hair, Dad'?"

Freddy Graves' only answer was a slow smile that curtained his twinkling eyes. With reposeful relish he pinched the tip of a corpulent Havana, and held it to his nose appreciatively before applying the match.

"Are you sure you have found your metier in

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music, Freddy?" inquired Marston. "Don't you think you might have better success as a nose specialist?"

Still no answer. Freddy watched the first smoke of his cigar spiral upward, and gathered in his slow glance all the beauty of the stately room. Its hanging of Gobelin, in which Dryads danced and Crusaders went forth to war; the old Flemish altarpiece that backed Carrington's chair; tall candles wrought in silver by some cunning Florentine; a small Correggio, so charmingly suave, facing him across the table; and the handsome carving of tall chairs that once stood in some grandee's castle. Coming back to his cigar, Freddy examined its ash solicitously. Then, fixing his eyes on the ceiling, he spoke with perfect irrelevance:

"I saw a funny thing in Little Italy, this morning, on my way to the Grand Central."

He paused to sip his coffee, and looked for an ash tray.

"Tell us about it before we restrain you," prodded Marston.

"Yes, tell us about it, Freddy, in spite of Marston," Carrington urged in his genially sardonic fashion. Other men at the table sat mutely expectant.

"Well, it wasn't so much," said Freddy slowly. "Only sort of funny. I'd been down that way to

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see a fellow I heard of, a good fellow in awfully hard luck, and was steaming through Little Italy, hustling for the station and hoping for a cab. Nearly lost my train. Most anybody would pull up on coming across a brown bear harnessed to a baby-carriage."

"Sure it wasn't a three-toed horse?" interjected Carrington, with skepticism void of offense.

"It was a bear all right; a youngish one, with a cinnamon complexion. And he was harnessed, with plenty of bells. A fat baby snoozed in the cart; at least, I suppose it snoozed. It didn't yell. A youngish woman with considerable dirt and good looks held the reins."

"Is that all?" queried Marston. "You didn't throw the foaming steed back on its haunches with one hand, while you deftly rescued the cooing bambino with the other?"

"I did not," Freddy replied with slight asperity. "You go to the deuce."

"I, too, saw something strahge in brown once," said General Welles musingly.

He was considerably the senior of other men at the table. But in his attitude was nothing paternal. He had grown old in years and distinguished at the bar without loss of youthful spirit. His eye was still keen; his carriage, elastic; and his voice hearty in trolling a song. Young men loved him,

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for he gave them good company and refrained from giving them pious advice.

"Tell us about it, General," urged Carrington. "Won't you have some chartreuse?"

"I ought not to, but I will. I'm a gouty old fellow, you know. Thank you, Maxwell."

As the General filled his glass from a decanter presented by the butler who had lingered in the background, Marston wondered. Why the look of hatred, so suddenly erased it seemed a flash of lightning from a clear sky, that distorted Maxwell's face as the General lowered his eyes reflectively? What interest, other than faithful service, could Carrington's veteran butler have in his employer's elderly and distinguished friend? As Marston turned the question in his mind the butler quietly left the room.

"This rolls away the years," the General said, sipping with delight. "But only for the hour. To-morrow morning the strange happening I recall will seem vastly more remote than it does to-night. I was lusty then."

"You're the youngest of us now," asserted Carrington.

"Perhaps I have been. But that was long ago."

His brilliant eyes slightly veiled, the General sat a moment in reminiscent mood. Then, with a shrug and a light sigh, he launched his tale.

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THE BOX OF THE GOLDEN SERPENTS

"It's hardly a story; rather an anecdote—a strange happening. Something to be embroidered by you of fertile fancy, if you please. It must be twenty years since it happened. I know it's just that. For Wentworth was my partner, and he died down there.

"The time I speak of we were investigating a mine in Mexico. It was up beyond Guaduhara, on the slopes of the Sierra Madres. A magnificent country then; probably it is so still. When I knew it no railroad threatened a pine forest presenting its ramparts of green for hundreds of miles. And the trees were superb—no underbrush. As the sunlight filtered through one could see ahead a mile.

"Pardon my slowness in coming to the point. When I speak of Mexico I cannot restrain my enthusiasm. Nor can any man familiar with her richness, and gorgeous charm. Did any of you ever see a buttercup tree? Or nasturtiums climbing into the branches of trees that showed thirty feet of clear trunk? I did, on the way to Guaduhara."

The General mused a moment; then went on.

"Wentworth died, and the mine petered out. Mines usually do. But I met Stevens. You youngsters may never have heard of him. He never hypnotized the newspapers. He knew a heap about classic art, though. And he was convinced of a connection between Aztec civilization and the an-

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cient life of India. Our wise men mostly laughed at the idea. They sized up Stevens as a poseur. He didn't look like an archæologist to them. More British than an Englishman. But level-headed, and grit clear through.

"When I met him that year he was after an Aztec temple. He got his inspiration from a Mexican Indian while digging for the lost city of Ouari, in Yucatan. Something the Indian said inflamed his fancy with the idea that a handful of Aztecs fleeing before the Spaniards had picked their way into the Sierras, where they kept sacred rites alive. Whether they preserved the pleasant custom of plucking the heart of a human sacrifice did not bother us much. Stevens was a born adventurer; and I liked chance for its own sake in those days."

The General paused to light a cigar, and traced the pattern of the table cover with his forefinger meditatively. Freddy Graves opened his lips, but did not speak. Presently the General resumed:

"We had really no plan at all. Only what Stevens, with his amazing smattering of tongues, had picked up from the Indian. He told a tall story of wonderful buildings he had seen; of mountains that reached to the sky; and a forest stretching like waves of a great sea. Evidently he thought of a place somewhere on the West coast. He didn't know the Sierra Madres by name.

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"The Indian could only tell us what he recalled of a journey in which he was muleteer to a strange man whose party was collected in a little coast town, where he appeared mysteriously. While the Indian was not gifted in description, Stevens gathered this traveller was of a dark brown complexion; not black like a negro, or shading into the copper of an Indian. He wore an orange robe, and sandals. What he wanted in Mexico his Indians never knew. Only they noted he carried into the mountains a box that never left his side. But when he came away from the wonderful building in the forest it was left behind.

"Of course, the Indians were eager to learn what was in the box. But they feared to take liberties with their employer. Then their superstitious nature was touched by his habit of speaking to the box, or to something in it. Sometimes they heard him in the night. After that the treasures of Montezuma would not have tempted them to lay hands on the box, much as they coveted it. Our Indian described it as of gold, with serpents in relief on the cover. They climbed the four corners, open-mouthed, with fangs that glistened, and brighter after nightfall. Most wonderful their eyes, yellow as the eyes of a tiger.

"They pushed inland, the Indian said, as fast as their mules could go. And after a while they left

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the regular trail. Then they were guided by landmarks their master found on a little map. In about a week, the Indian thought, they came to the journey's end. It was near the full of the moon and they went on after sunset. Suddenly they emerged from the forest. Before them stretched a plateau. Of course, I'm not undertaking to give you the color of the Indian's language. Stevens had a hard enough job, dragging the story from him piecemeal.

"There was the plain, with the dark woods behind. And vaguely dark woods below, stretching far as eye could see. Before them, in the middle of the clearing, stood a building that seemed round. The native Mexicans were not suffered to approach it. At a distance their employer commanded them to halt. He entered the house of mystery with strange men in robes who came to meet him, speaking an unknown tongue.

"Through the night the Indians sometimes heard a plaintive piping; and lights flashed in the windows—then dulled to blackness. It was a little past daybreak when their master emerged to begin the return trip to the coast. The Indians had, however, a look at the building in the clear light. It had a great entrance supported by shining pillars. And the pillars were surmounted by great snakes of gold. With oaths to the Virgin,

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Stevens' Indian swore the snakes raised their heads to the sun in its first rays.

"The party hurried back to the coast, and took passage south. There their employer paid them and disappeared as mysteriously as he had come. That was all our guide knew. It was enough for Stevens. He took fire at the suggestion. As soon as possible, with our very limited resources, we organized our temple expedition and set out. For a while progress was mostly a combat with cactus. We had hard enough work to save our khaki.

"But I'm loquacious. I have used a deal of language in approaching an adventure soon over. The fourth day in, or maybe the fifth—it doesn't matter—we had been on the go for a couple of hours when Stevens, who was pushing the Indians rather hard, abruptly called a halt. He stood staring at something on his right. My eyes followed his, and we stepped forward for a better look.

"A little off the trail, and stretched under a great cactus bush, lay a Hindu. The only Hindu I ever saw in that part of the world. Just then he seemed a promise of success with the thing we had haphazardly set out to do. He was thin and beardless, with a long, livid scar over his right eye. Stone dead, but not yet rigid. His fingers were hardly stiff in their clutch on something that glittered in a

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slim shaft of sunlight. A little box of gold, with beautiful decoration of serpents in relief. Stevens stooped to take it, but stayed his hand.

"The cover moved. It was raised a little; and the head of a snake appeared. A small snake that might have been coated with gold, it shone so. It wriggled out, and coiled on the Hindu's breast. For a minute, perhaps, it remained there, holding our eyes with its unwavering regard. Then it glided into the bush."

"Why didn't you catch it?" asked Freddy, who had listened with half-closed eyes, his rotund body comfortably wedged between chair and table.

The General regarded him appraisingly, but ignored the question.

"When we looked the Hindu over," he said, "the only evident injury was a little bite on the left hand, which held the box. That arm was swollen considerably. But the face was not distorted. It wore a look of surprise in death.

"Stevens pushed the cover up with his riding-whip. The box was empty. We took it, and buried the Hindu there in a shallow trench. Then we went on. But our guide was panic-stricken. For two more days we managed to keep him on the job. Then in the night he disappeared. That was the end of the temple hunt. Nobody else could even guess which way to go."

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"What became of the box?" Freddy roused himself to inquire.

"That? Oh, that disappeared the night the Indian did."

"Do you think he took it?" Freddy persisted.

"It looked to me as if something took both."

The General answered with a suggestion of reluctance. But he went on, slowly, with careful searching of memory.

"That night Stevens and I turned in together. A few yards from the others. Just distant enough to mark a necessary distinction. As usual, sleep came soon after a hard day in the open. It must have been after midnight when I woke. Not suddenly, but by what seemed a desperate effort of will. You know the feeling, and the laborious look for something—one knows not what. It seemed to me I saw a form silhouetted against a thorn bush in moonlight dimmed by great trees. I spoke to Stevens, but got no reply.

"Somewhat doubtful, I slept again. The next I remember was a guttural Indian song. It was possibly intended as a call to us. For it was daylight, and the Indians were busy at the fire. Stevens hadn't stirred. He never did again. He lay quietly on his side, with a look of inquiry in half-open eyes. There was a little bite on his left hand. The gold box had disappeared."

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Silence.

"What's the rest of it?"

Roger Vincent was the interlocutor now.

"You want the details? There aren't any. As I told you, our guide had disappeared in the night. Nothing to explain it; only a couple of souvenirs. A red kerchief he had worn about his neck was caught on a thorn bush. And to its nearest neighbor clung a bit of thin yellow fabric. Now you have it all."

"What is your theory?" asked Freddy—undaunted.

The General countered with a question:

"Have you heard of Izana, the daughter of Vishnu, who plays with the sun as her golden ball? And is protected at her altar by snakes of gold?"

"But you don't take any stock in magic! Do you?"

Freddy was wide-eyed.

"I don't know," the General said, stroking his chin reflectively. "Once I thought I saw a man raised from the dead."

"But ——" began Freddy.

"All buts barred," interposed Carrington good-naturedly. "Do you think you are trying a case with the General, Freddy? Where you shine is at the piano. Help us to forget all the questions you asked."

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"All right. If you want it. Helen said something about it before dinner."

Freddy flexed the fingers of his disengaged hand appraisingly, and brought his body nearer an upright position.

"I think," he added with a cherubic smile, "her conscience has quit compelling her to dislike Wagner."

"You rested while Freddy did all his cross-examining of the General," Carrington said to Marston. "Do a little scouting for us, won't you? I want to keep clear until Carlotta finishes the destruction of Fanny. It was well under way, in spite of the General, before they left the table. Do you mind?"

"Anything to oblige," Marston agreed. "Sit tight."

He entered the great hall where Carringtons painted by Copley, and those decorously delineated in American art's black walnut period, by contrast emphasized the brilliance of a Sargent showing Alfred. As he paused a moment before this portrait Fanny Cutshaw turned from a window commanding the long slope to the lake.

"Oh, Mr. Marston," she said with appealing accent. "I'm so glad to see you."

"That is pleasant to hear," he responded in friendly fashion. "Did you come out for the moonlight?"

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"How did you guess? I'm crazy for a breath of fresh air. Let's go out for a few minutes."

"Are you dressed for it?"

He looked dubiously at her bare neck and arms; at the filmy robing of her charmingly slender figure, and the little feet in high-heeled slippers of embroidered satin.

"I'm all right. It's warm. And Maxwell will get me a cloak," she added, as he still hesitated.

"All right, then, when I have done my errand. I came to ask if you ladies would like to hear Freddy play. For once, it takes no coaxing."

"Maxwell can ask Helen." She was already pressing a button. "If I let you go, somebody will capture you. And I do want to go out. I'm afraid," plaintively, "to go alone."

She was twisting her handkerchief nervously, and her pretty, undistinguished face showed a strain. Despite his feeling for Carlotta, Marston experienced a sense of outrage in his surmise that Fanny had been socially hazed. She seemed very small and inoffensive.

"All right," he said kindly. "We'll send in a message. I'd like a stroll, too. It's a gorgeous night."

"Thank you," she said with a look of gratitude that made him somewhat ashamed, and turned to the butler, waiting at a respectful distance.

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"Oh, Maxwell, will you get me a wrap? And tell Mrs. Carrington, please, that Mr. Carrington wishes to know if she wants some music."

"Yes, Madam."

There was no change in Maxwell's impassive face as he replied to Mrs. Cutshaw. But Marston felt in his voice a suggestion of his scorn for social outlanders. It was a new thought that they must also bear the condescension of the pantry. Fanny, however, was nowise cast down. With Marston at her disposal, she beamed again. And the principal reason for her sudden cheerfulness was sealed to him.

"Will this do, Madam?"

With regard for garments not extended to the wearer, Maxwell had selected a wrap of purple harmonizing with Fanny's gown.

"That's very nice," she said approvingly, and bent on Marston a look that was a call to service.

"Will you take the message now to Mrs. Carrington, Maxwell?" he said to the waiting butler, as he fastened the cloak under a coquettishly raised chin.

"Very well, sir. Do you care for a top-coat?"

"No, I shall be warm enough. If there is any inquiry for us, you may say we have gone for a walk."

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"Very well, sir."

As they turned away the butler's eyes followed them with a curious look.

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CHAPTER III

A NIGHT AND A VISION

MARSTON swung open the great door, and followed Fanny out into the night. The moon rode high; so high and clear the land was bathed in light like that of Venus's fabled garden in Cyprus, where flourished the tree with yellow leaves and branches, and golden fruit. Warm September. The air held both the allure of full fruition, and the first intimation of Autumn's softly treading feet. Near and far rose the fused chorus of insect pipings, rejoicing of life so soon to die.

Marston shivered slightly, with an undefined feeling of loneliness. Fanny felt it, and came close to his side.

"It's spooky. Don't you want to smoke?"

"Not unless you wish me to. There are no mosquitoes to keep away. And ghosts don't mind smoke."

He tucked away the hand laid lightly on his arm. For a few minutes they paced in silence. The house was lost to view now; only moonlight before them on the winding road. On either side the trees seemed to press closer.

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"Do you know," Fanny said, breaking the silence suddenly, "how nice it is to know a man like you?"

"It's nice of you to think so," he answered with embarrassment. "I trust you don't think I'm any better than men in general."

"But you are." She pressed his arm impulsively. "We women know more about men than they know about each other. It's funny," she went on, a little bitterly, "but nice men are seldom interesting; and the interesting men are hardly ever good."

"Are we all down in black and white?"

He took a jocose note to lighten the situation. But still Fanny appeared to brood.

"Heaven knows," she said at length, "I've had a hard enough time in trying to find out."

Her impulsive gesture of protest was followed by an exclamation of pain.

"What's the matter?" he asked anxiously.

"It's nothing. I caught my handkerchief on a thorn."

She was freeing it as she explained.

"But you have hurt your finger. It's bleeding."

"Only a scratch. It will stop in a moment. . . . Come on!"

Wrapping her handkerchief about the pricked finger as she called her challenge, she caught up her

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skirt with her disengaged hand, and was off down the road. He overtook her in time to protect her in the inevitable stumble.

"You can't run with high heels," he tersely observed.

Between tears and laughter, she rested in the shelter of his arm, which drew no closer a burden alluring in the moonlight. Presently she put it aside with a slightly petulant air.

"It must be splendid," she said, "to be so sensible. Don't you think we ought to be going back?"

"I'm afraid I have taken you too far," he replied contritely.

"Oh, no." She laughed lightly. "You are the soul of consideration."

The Fanny Cutshaw everyone knew returned to view as they strolled back, slowly breasting the hill. Did Marston know Lady So-and-So? Had he ever met the famous Mrs. Blish of Cairo? Was it possible he had never eaten a salad at the Café de la Paix? But one could never forget it.

Marston answered politely, for the most part with negatives. Still she rattled on, as a child turns pages of a well-remembered picture book. He hardly heard her, though his lips framed appropriate responses. Inner consciousness was concerned with one in the house on the hill. His at-

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tention came back to Fanny with sudden cessation of her monologue.

With a whispered, "Oh!" she halted in the middle of a sentence.

"What is it?" he asked, his eyes straining to pierce the darkness of roadside trees.

No answer.

Marston moved to investigate. But Fanny clutched his arm with convulsive vigor. Amazed and unresisting, he suffered himself to be hurried up the hill. Several hundred yards they covered before Fanny paused with a shuddering sigh.

He saw how white she was, with the dilation of fear in her eyes. She shivered violently, and he feared for her self-control again. She shook from head to foot, and half turned away, raising her handkerchief to her eyes. It was spotted with blood from her lacerated finger.

"Take it away," she said, and thrust it into his hands. "Put it out of sight, please."

He dropped the handkerchief into a pocket, and took her arm.

"All right now," he said soothingly.

Obediently she fell into step, and they went on slowly. At length she spoke, with a little preliminary sound that might have been either a smothered sob or laugh.

"You must think I'm silly to behave so."

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"Not a bit," he assured her.

After a moment's silence she met his unspoken inquiry with a counter-question:

"Do you believe thinking of a thing can make you see it?"

"Why, I don't know," he answered, a little startled. Then he sought to spare her embarrassment. "Sometimes one sees, and hears, too, strange things."

"You're so earnest."

She was laughing a little now; a transparent pretense of gaiety. Again she rattled on, talking a bit wildly, until they rounded a turn in the road that brought Oakhurst into view.

A music-room window opened wide disclosed Amy Stone and Roger Vincent in a far corner, and evidently interested in their own conversation. Carrington lounged with negligent grace that left doubt whether he was merely somnolent or absorbed in the music. Helen sat by a window where music and moonlight met, with a look of ardent appreciation Marston knew well. Carlotta, the enigma, brooded with eyes fixed on the statue of a Crusader, returning battered but exalted from a holy war. Freddy was seated at the piano, for the nonce merged with beauty.

Without the pretension of a professional pianist, he yet had sufficient technique to serve a musician's

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soul. He was in the midst of an intermezzo of the gentler Brahms, whose modulations flower in soft dreams.

By mutual impulse Marston and Fanny rested on a settle under the open window, hidden but appreciative auditors. The music gave forth its tender charm, and vanished with piquant accéleration into the air. Fanny rose, extending her hand as Freddy turned from the piano, his usual plump and beaming self.

"I'm going to my room," she said hurriedly. "Please make my excuses to Helen. Thank you so much—for everything."

As she reached the first landing, leaving Marston standing irresolute in the hall, Carlotta came suddenly from the music-room.

"Won't you have a look at the moon?" he said haphazardly.

For she seemed oblivious of his presence.

"I think you have seen enough of it for one night."

With this observation, made scathing by her manner, she followed vanished Fanny up the stairs.

The iron of injustice entered Marston's soul. He stared after Carlotta with a fervent ejaculation.

"Ah! Here is Romeo," called Carrington as he entered the music-room. "Dick, your face is flushed."

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With a smile of understanding, Helen beckoned him to her side. "Were you making a test, Dick?" she asked, as he selected a cigarette.

He paused, match in hand, and somewhat resentful in his manner.

"No?" she continued. "Anyway, it worked."

"I don't know what you mean," he said with violent exhalation. "I tried to be decent to a woman nobody but you seems to fancy. And I must say it doesn't seem to pay."

"But you're the champion of the under-dog, you know. And it doesn't work for pay. Dicky," with an earnest accent, "I think Carlotta likes you very much."

"You do? Why?"

"That's for you to find out. I must escape now. I can see Alfred is about to propose bridge. And there is no need for me to be a martyr. I suppose Roger is paying court to Amy by describing the charms of his latest polo pony. That leaves you and Alfred, the General and Freddy—luckless man. He makes even me feel intelligent at the card table.

"Good night, everybody," she called to the assembled company. "Freddy's music puts me in a mood for sleep."

"There are four of us left," Carrington observed, ignoring Amy and Roger. "How about a rubber?"

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"I'm getting rusty in my game," said the General.

"I'm game, if you can stand me," assented Freddy.

"All right," said Marston.

"Settled."

In Carrington's eyes shone a deeper light. He lavished on games a concentration he would have scorned to devote to business.

"I suppose," he went on, "a host ought to sacrifice himself to his guests. We'll dispense with cutting. I'll take Freddy for my partner."

The card table was brought out. Play went with normal variation in the luck of deals. Marston, who was rated a sound player, and the General, somewhat inclined to employ cavalry tactics, had in Carrington an opponent who dismayed the dull at cards. What protective skill could do for the inept, Freddy had as his shield. They were even small winners when the General's plaintive observation that gout was calling brought play to its close.

"I think I'll go up, too," said Freddy. "I have an idea for a song," he added, when Carrington laughed.

"I knew it hadn't anything to do with bridge," was his parting shot.

Carrington seemed inclined to follow the general

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example. "Have to write a letter to my agent," he explained. "In the morning I'll feel too depressed. Ring, if you want anything. Good night."

Sitting alone, Marston pondered the evening. What was the matter with Mrs. Cutshaw? She must have been reminded of a bitter chapter in her life. "Skittish," he said to himself, and turned to a matter purely personal. Carlotta's snub, modesty forbade him to explain. But he viewed the room, and the hall's vista, in a new light—seeing a home. With a half-rueful smile he went slowly up the stairs.

The night's surprises were not yet finished.

On the first landing Marston paused,—stricken with amazement. At that moment Carlotta emerged from a room he knew as Mrs. Cutshaw's, and passed to her own across the hall. Her door closed on an alluring vision. Of deeply auburn hair that flowed in rich profusion; of feet cased in Turkish slippers, and the alabaster of neck and arm.

His heart beat unsteadily as he went on to the floor above. Again he paused. For Maxwell, the immaculate, the perfect servant, stood outside General Welles' door in an attitude suggestive of eavesdropping. On the topmost step Marston came back on his heels in the shock of surprise. Instantly Maxwell was himself again. He straight-

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ened as the sound reached his ears, and came straight to where Marston stood at the head of the stairs.

With, "Is there anything I can get for you, sir?" and, "Thank you, sir. Good night," to an involuntary negative, he was gone before Marston could frame a question.

Impressions crowded as Marston went through the routine of undressing. He reached for a clarifying cigarette, and came in contact with Fanny's handkerchief. A little square of linen slightly torn and blood-stained. For an irresolute moment he held it over a scrap-basket. Then he opened his clothes-press, and put it in a pocket of the coat selected for to-morrow.

Comfortable in bed, and duly bolstered with pillows, he took up Horace, the elegant, the sane, most modern of ancient poets. In the domain of suave fancy he was ferried to drowsiness. He slept, and dreamed.

* * * * * * *

It was a mediæval city, and he one of its gallants. He fingered the dagger at his belt as he crossed the square by the great fountain, with its gargoyles that mocked the passer-by of daylight, and at night spouted musically in silence seldom broken, save by howling dogs or some unwise adventurer's cry. He turned the corner by the Liberator's statue, and

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entered a gate of the first palazzio, opened at his cautious knock by a silent serving man.

His hand still was on the dagger, as he followed the waiting maid through dim passages to a great room of the lord's family. She drew aside the draperies of an entrance on the right. Who rose to meet him, in a far corner's candlelight? Not Catherine. It was her younger sister, Bianca. What had she to do with Catherine's rendezvous? Amazed, he listened to her explanation, her protestation. She herself had sent the message. For she loved him more than Catherine. Did he doubt it? And was she not more beautiful? She challenged him in stormy pride.

Midst grief at her abasement a sharp sound came to his ears. The sound of a sword drawn from its sheath. He whirled—to face her father. His father's foe. "Dog!" That word only was flung in his face. He drew his dagger, a feeble weapon against the sword. With a cry of despair, Bianca threw herself on his breast. He put her behind him, and faced his slowly advancing foe, his executioner. With cold malignancy the dagger was struck from his hand. Helpless before the weaving steel, he confronted that lean and furrowed face, those eyes narrowed in hatred until they seemed but points of fire. The blade was at his throat ——

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Clutching the coverlet, Marston sat up in bed. His cry of "God!" still echoed in his ears. Moonlight filtering through an overcast sky reëstablished his connection with reality. One by one, he picked out familiar objects in the room. But figures of an old Italian city were still vividly in mind. Such a dream! "I wonder what Freud would say," he mused, and drew the covers again about his shoulders, settling down in bed. Overcoming fretted nerves, he slowly won his way back to sleep.

Long after, or so it seemed, he found himself again sitting up in bed, and trembling with excitement. It seemed to him he had heard a woman's cry. A smothered outcry somewhere beneath him. Painfully alert, he listened. No sound came to his ears. Nothing but an owl's hoot, far off in the woods. Once more he slept.

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CHAPTER IV

FANNY FOCUSSES ATTENTION

THE hesitant sun touched Marston's eyelids in its sallies from far-spreading clouds. As he came back to consciousness the house was wrapped in stillness. The watch on the reading-table at his elbow registered just past nine. With the application of a match his fire crackled cheerfully. He yawned, and closed the window by his dressing-room table.

Nature's mellowness was but a memory in the morning's chill. He looked upon a landscape washed with rain. The pines seemed even darker, with a hint of blue in far-flung lines. A few maples near by showed a dash of scarlet, the first flag of fall. This Marston noted, and a flight of crows winging their way with steady energy to somewhere south. Nature had changed her registration over night.

He finished his toilet and went leisurely down the stairs. Still no door open on either his own floor or that next below. In the great hall logs gave joy to the eye, and genial heat. He heard, too, the crackling of a fire in the library, and knew without

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seeing that some mindful servant had filled a curious Chinese bowl with purple flowers Helen loved. Across doors opening on the long slope to the lake draperies with dragons grimacing in the firelight were still drawn.

A sense of seclusion, of rich ease, brooded over all. As Marston gazed meditatively at the fire, lighting a cigarette, Maxwell coughed decorously behind him.

"Will you have your breakfast now, sir? In the library? Very well, sir. I told cook to prepare it at your usual time."

"Thank you, Maxwell," said Marston amiably, and went into the library to finish his smoke. As Maxwell placed the tray, and paused to ask, "Is there anything else I can get for you, sir?" he studied the butler's face. It yielded nothing.

The usual mask, if it was a mask, of a servant respectful and self-respecting, and deeply conscious of dignity hedging a butler's estate. Could one say to him, "Maxwell, why were you listening outside General Welles' door last night?" or, "Maxwell, why do you hate General Welles?" Marston smiled in realization of the feeling of gaucherie that would ensue, as he surveyed that retreating back.

Breakfast over, he picked up a copy of the *Mercure de France*, in Carrington's affection a close

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second to the *Illustrated Sporting News*, and read a story written with waspish wit.

The sound of hoof-beats drew him to the window. Amy and Roger were racing up the last rise to the house, her bay mare slightly leading his big gray. As they came thundering up she raised her hand in defiance, and her yellow hair streamed in the breeze. Riding with the seat of a centaur, Roger reached to snatch her from the saddle.

Marston thought of Siegfried and Brunhild, the perfect pair. But this Siegfried would bring no sorrow to Valhalla. For this Brunhild there would be no ecstatic end on funeral pyre. They would not suffer through soaring. Because they were young, and thoughtlessly happy yet subject to life's uncertainties, Marston thought of them with indulgent tenderness, and a worldling's little prayer for their well-being. Turning their mounts over to a groom, they came breezily in with a careless, "Good morning."

"You're missing it in here," Roger called over his shoulder, as he followed Amy up the stairs.

Somehow they had changed the atmosphere indoors. The house was a place of confinement rather than shelter from raw wind. And he was weary with unconfessed expectancy. He knew where garments hung, and got a cap and coat without ringing for a servant. Swinging a blackthorn,

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he set forth briskly. It would be three miles down and back to the boat-house on the lake.

A legal problem held his attention for a while; but Carlotta would not stay outside. His mind and heart went back to a moment on the stairs.

At the steps again, he paused for a last deep breath. And so his eyes came casually to rest on a bit of yellow caught in a climbing rose-bush that reached to the eaves. He disengaged it. A scrap of yellow that was very fine, and seemingly torn from some garment. It was fringed in a ragged edge.

"I wonder who has had a frock ruined?" he said to himself, dropping the bit of cloth into a pocket.

Inside he found life astir, the vanguard for luncheon. Carrington had a volume of sporting prints on his knees. The General, with a boutonnière of red supplementing his ruddy cheeks, stood by the fire, a figure touched by frost but far from withered. Presently appeared Amy and Roger, dressed for golf and palpably happy. Freddy came down with the look of one stinted in slumber, and relaxed gratefully in a cushioned chair.

A step Marston knew heralded Carlotta. It was to be, he gathered, one of her temperate days. She was dressed in black that brought out the sheen of her hair, and seemed a frame to delicately vivid

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beauty. To Marston she was pleasantly polite. The General appeared to be her beau ideal. He responded with some appreciation of the situation's humor.

Helen Carrington arrived, with a brisk clicking of heels and cheery, "Good morning. If it isn't too late. I trust you all have found something interesting to do."

Lazy murmurs of assent.

"I have been scandalously lazy," she went on. "Just stayed in bed, and read Anatole France. He makes me feel supine, anyway. But some had energy this morning. I heard a cavalry charge up the hill, and rose in season to see Dick walking as if he had a wager. Was it some oppressor of the poor you waved your stick at so fiercely, Dicky? Carlotta evidently was playing the nun. Freddy, I suppose, snoozed, as he is doing now. Alfred's habits are well known—if not famous.

"Now I have answered for you all, who wants me to make a forecast for the afternoon? Amy and Roger ——" She paused in mock apprehension as Amy threateningly raised a cushion. "Very well. Discretion is the better part ——"

"Luncheon is served, Madam."

It was Maxwell's ceremonious appearance. They rose in unison; but Helen's progress was checked by memory.

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"Fanny isn't here. Has anyone seen her today?"

Marston's "No" was the only response.

Helen reached a quick decision. "We'll go in. She knows the time for luncheon. Maxwell, go to Mrs. Cutshaw's door, please, and tell her luncheon is on the table. Jennie will serve the soup."

"Very well, Madam."

He disappeared, and cheerful chatter was resumed. Freddy, whose anecdotes amused most in his air of self-communing and conspicuous lack of detail, was moved to recall pangs of modesty at his first ball. In the midst of laughter attending Carrington's supplementary statement Maxwell appeared.

"Well, Maxwell?" questioned Mrs. Carrington.

"I knocked on Mrs. Cutshaw's door, Madam. But there was no answer."

"She must be asleep. Tell Fifi to go in and call her."

"Very well, Madam."

"Now," said Carrington. "It's Dick's turn. Lighten our suspense while Fifi wakes the Sleeping Princess. Console us for delay with the fish by your thrilling story of a moonlight stroll."

"Nothing in my experience can rival your imagination," returned Marston, more conscious of Carlotta's heightened color than of his own.

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"Why sit here stabbing those present," she asked pointedly, "when it is much easier to slander the absent?"

"Time!" called Freddy, in imitation of a ringside announcer, as Maxwell's assistant entered with the fish.

A random remark led to discussion of the forthcoming polo match between Meadowbrook and Rockaway. Now Amy and Roger came in. Running with animation, talk was suspended when Helen rose, saying, "Please excuse me for a few minutes."

Carrington allowed a flash of astonishment in his otherwise unruffled face. Only Marston saw Maxwell standing near the doorway and behind his employer's chair. His expression was at once hesitant and urgent. It was but a minute or two before Helen returned.

"I'm sorry to disturb luncheon so," she said as she resumed her place. "But Fifi can't get into Fanny's room. The door seems to be locked. I think you'd better go up, Alfred. And Dick, too,—if he will, to find out what the trouble is. No, I don't want anyone else disturbed, please," she added, when the General pushed back his chair and started to his feet with the manner of a volunteer.

As he followed Carrington from the room Mar-

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ston bore the memory of Carlotta's eyes. Was it apprehension they expressed?

"I hope we've travelled up here for something worth while," said Carrington, who obviously regarded the inquiry as unnecessary interference with eating. He knocked at the chamber door. No answer.

"Fanny!" he called. Still no answer.

He knocked again—louder. Only silence. He tried the door; it did not yield.

"Well," he observed, a trifle peevishly, "I guess we must break in."

Stepping back a pace, he brought his shoulder against the door with a powerful thrust that shattered its lock. He pushed the door back on its protesting hinges. And they entered the room.

In the full light of early afternoon Fanny was stretched on the floor. She lay on her left side, her head pillowed on her arm. Her left leg drawn up slightly, and the right arm resting on the rug, suggested quiet slumber. She wore a blue dressing-gown over her night-robe; and her hair was unbound. Standing over her, Carrington called her name again,—softly:

"Fanny."

The shaded eyes did not open. He touched her hand, lifted it, and placed it gently at her side.

"I think she is dead," he said.

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For a minute or so he stood silent at the window. And the spacious landscape, fusing at last with the blue, pointed the mystery of a spirit's flight.

"I suppose we must notify someone," said Carrington thoughtfully, and turning at last to Marston. "I'll consult Helen about it. You stay here, Dick. If you don't mind. I don't want the servants gaping about."

Left to himself, Marston eased consciousness of the figure on the floor by an inspection of the room. Covers of the bed in an alcove were turned back for the night. But their smoothness seemed evidence that Fanny had not risen from bed to meet her fate. He looked into the bath-room. It disclosed only the expected. Tooth-paste, and other toilet articles in a little cabinet with half-open door. A pair of slippers; a towel dropped carelessly after Fanny's last bath. That was all.

Back to the familiar chamber. He himself had occupied it more than once. There was nothing illuminative in the fireplace, with its neatly arranged kindling. He mentally checked up the mantel, with its Swiss clock, the shepherdess in ivory, and a pair of tall candlesticks. The bookcase beside it seemed, as usual, well filled. And there was the Chinese urn that had so worried him, lest a careless foot shatter a Ming. He somewhat

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casually examined the dressing-table, with a little jacket of silk hanging over the back of its chair. The array of powder and cream, with warm-hued sticks and puffs, seemed about what one might expect.

In the open writing-desk he saw a stack of paper; the envelopes, the ink-well of silver, with a horse's head for its cap; and the pens. Conspicuous upon the blotter, and secured by a paper-weight, a sheet of paper showed a few words written. Marston stooped to read. Much as it seemed like spying on the dead, he knew the contents of the room would be subject to official inspection.

A sprawling hand, like the writing of a school-girl:

"DEAR JIM:

"I must have five thousand dollars ——"

Then a blot, possibly caused by the falling of a nerveless hand.

Who was "Jim"? Why had Fanny demanded money of him? Marston had no answer. He shrank from imputing a base motive to the woman dead.

What was on the chiffonier? A Swiss watch ticked quietly. He noted its closed case. Beside it a ruby ring he remembered on Fanny's finger, and a diamond set in sapphires. A pearl necklace

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seemed carelessly dropped when taken from the wearer's neck.

Nothing argued confusion until he came to the chiffonier's top drawer. Its contents were rumpled, and an under-garment of pink, edged with lace, hung over the edge. There a sense of unwarrantable intrusion stayed his hand. Let the authorities investigate — because they must. He turned his eyes to the sofa, beside which Fanny lay. Only a cushion seemed out of place and it was neither torn nor stained.

As he looked again at the quiet form a feeling of danger, acute but unexplained, sent a shiver down his spine. He whirled to behold—nothing. Without volition his eyes focussed on a ventilator set into the wall. Was anything behind that rectilinear frame, with its ornamental pattern of iron? He forced himself to approach, standing before it. Only blackness confronted him. With unrelaxed vigilance he drew the bookcase from its position beside the mantel, slowly across the ventilator. A book withdrawn showed the case solidly backed with mahogany. He sighed in relief, and moved the Ming vase to the side of the bookcase nearer the mantel.

Marston seated himself, facing Fanny's body. And somehow it seemed she might speak. Were lids that shrouded the quiet eyes raised ever so

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slightly? Would lips curved in lines of easy slumber open to reveal their secret?

He was startled by the entrance of Carrington, speaking apologetically:

"Sorry I was away so long. Complications, you know. I had to tell the news. Then the happy house party went up in smoke. Amy and Roger wanted to take the next train. And Freddy longed for Riverside Drive. The General, though, took it well. Carlotta was sensible, too. You might almost have thought she expected it. Women are queer."

He lighted a cigarette, wasting two or three matches nervously.

"I don't blame anybody for wanting to light out," he went on. "I'd do it myself, if I could. But the General steadied them by saying all hands must stand by to tell what they know. Only it's a case of what we don't know."

"You haven't a suspicion?" put in Marston.

He wondered why he asked, almost before the words were out of his mouth. Carrington regarded him with astonishment.

"Why, no," he said. "You haven't, have you? Of course not," as Marston shook his head.

"It happens there is a bit of luck in the mess. Helen says Dr. Morrison, who practices in this region, is expected soon to see one of the servants.

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So he can give us a medical judgment on Fanny, and tell us what to do. 'Uncle Ben,' as they call him, is a pretty good doctor, with lots of common sense. A kind of parish priest, you know; and doctor and banker, too. Helps the people with mortgages, and cures them of the fever. I'll take his judgment."

"It's good luck," suggested Marston, "if he happens to be a medical officer of the state. The authorities can make it disagreeable, or easy for you."

Carrington shrugged his shoulders.

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CHAPTER V

DR. BEN SEEKS A CLUE

"WHO's here?" asked a brisk voice.

A rather short, thick-set man, with rumpled hair and a beard of gray-streaked brown, came briskly into the room.

"Hullo, Alfred," he said, and turned abruptly to Marston, who felt the power of sharp but friendly blue eyes surveying him behind thick glasses. Carrington went through the ceremony of introduction.

"I've heard of you," said Dr. Ben, with a strong grip of the hand.

"Now, what's this?" He suddenly transferred his attention to the body on the floor. "H'm. It's lucky I happened to be coming in. Nothing changed in the room, I suppose?"

His tone was sharply impersonal.

"No," Carrington answered. Marston stood mute.

"Who has been here since the body was found?"

"Only Marston and myself."

"H'm."

Marston felt his face flush slightly under the Doc-

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tor's searching regard. "Uncle Ben" might have his benevolent moments. But standing there, he personified a search-light.

"H'm," he said to himself. Stooping over the body, he touched the cheek, and put a finger on the wrist. "Stone dead. H'm."

Still stooping, he carefully surveyed the body, looking slowly up and down. He noted the peaceful pose, and lack of any suggestion of disturbance in surroundings. Then, rising somewhat laboriously, he stood at Fanny's head, and motioned Carrington to her feet.

"Help me lift her to the bed. Carefully," as they raised their slight burden. "Now I'll make an examination, and report presently. Get all your people together. Guests, and the servants, too. I may want them. Guess that's all."

As they went out, Dr. Ben stood by the bed, pulling his beard reflectively. "H'm," Marston heard him say.

In the library Helen Carrington and the rest of the house party awaited them. The same inquiry shone in every eye. Carrington hastened to meet it.

"I'm sorry, it's bad news. Dr. Ben says Fanny is dead. And he wants to see us, all of us, when he comes down. Some of the servants, too. Will you send for Fifi and Maxwell, Helen? I guess that's the end of disagreeable details for the present."

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After a moody pause he came out with a half-apology:

"Of course, I'm not responsible for this situation. But I feel as if I owed everybody a written apology."

"We wouldn't accept it," said the General. "You've nothing to blame yourself for."

Roger Vincent hesitated, then mustered courage for a question.

"Will it do any harm if Amy and I take a little walk?"

"On the contrary," Helen assured him, "I think it might do you good. But come back soon. General," she continued, "won't you show me that map? I'm sure there'll be time before Dr. Ben needs us. And I do want to see the place where you first met my father." With a little smile she concluded, "1865 is a long way back. And you're a boy still."

"Knowing you has helped to keep me so," he gallantly responded, as they went arm-in-arm from the room.

Freddy fidgeted in mute appeal. "Come along," said Carrington. They disappeared together.

Marston looked at Carlotta. And Carlotta looked through him. The width of the fireplace between them seemed to him an immense distance. She had a book in her hand. And, though she did

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not read it, she conveyed an impression of absorption. Marston felt himself studiously ignored.

He reached nervously for his handkerchief, and brought out—another. Startled, he gazed at the little square of blood-stained linen between his thumb and forefinger. Carlotta gazed at it, too.

"A precious souvenir?"

Her question seemed more like a scornful observation.

"It's Fanny's," he said, and hastened to explain. "Last night she gave it to me to keep for her—when we were out walking. She scratched her finger on a bush. And the sight of blood made her nervous."

Carlotta's air of unconcern spurred him on.

"Of course, you don't know. I didn't have a chance to tell you. That was the reason, I think, she went straight up-stairs when we reached the house."

"Undoubtedly," said Carlotta coldly. "You are very good at putting two and two together. I don't suppose you saw her afterward."

"Why, no," Marston hastened to say. And with difficulty he refrained from adding:

"Did you?"

Carlotta ostentatiously turned a page, and began reading. Marston's uncertainty whether it were better to retreat, or maintain a front of equal un-

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concern, was ended by the return of Helen and General Welles. Presently Freddy and Carrington appeared, if not cheered at least saved from utter dejection. Conversation of the stop-gap variety came to an end with the entrance of Dr. Ben.

"H'm," he observed, taking his stand by the fireplace for a survey of the room. "All here? No. Young Vincent, and the Stone girl missing."

His blue eyes rested on Helen, with a sudden crinkling smile.

"I guess they aren't destroying any evidence."

Again he was curtly impersonal. "No use in beating about the bush," he said to all present. "I find in Mrs. Cutshaw's body two injuries. A scratch on the left forefinger. Nothing. And a small wound at the base of the skull. No obvious cause of death. H'm."

He studied the pattern of a rug in which Persian makers had woven narrative sealed to purchasers from strange lands. And as he stared at the rug he tapped his teeth with a gold pencil—meditatively. Seemingly reaching a decision, he surveyed the assembled company.

Carrington had the look of one prepared to be resentful. Helen leaned forward in her chair; in her eyes half-fearful anticipation, and regret. Carlotta sat staring into the flames. Amy and Roger, who had slipped in quietly, occupied a window-seat

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a little apart. They were nervous, though patently guileless. Maxwell and Fifi, Helen's maid, stood near the door, at a seemly distance. Marston, who had companioned Dr. Ben's roving glance, felt that he himself over-elaborately registered unconcern when it came at last to him.

"I guess," said Dr. Ben, "we can clear up this case without the help of the papers. You don't hanker for advertising, Alfred?"

"That's a better joke to you than it is to me," Carrington replied with a frown.

"You see," Dr. Ben explained, twirling his watch-charm, "it's my investigation in the first instance. I'm medical examiner of this district. And the district attorney usually takes my advice. He rather has to, you know, with no police or bright reporters about."

"Well," said Carrington, a little aggressively. "You can't handle this business of Fanny's death without some report. Can you?"

"I'm not proposing, Alfred, to break the law," Dr. Ben observed, and continued unruffled. "I shall perform a post-mortem. Just now I wonder what anybody can tell me about Mrs. Cutshaw. Say, in the last twenty-four hours. Who saw her?"

"We all saw her at dinner, Dr. Ben," Helen explained.

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"And after that?"

"I saw her afterward," Marston forced himself to say, with exasperation that a simple explanation seemed so difficult. "And I think I can explain the scratch on her finger you mentioned."

"H'm." Dr. Ben resumed tapping his teeth with the gold pencil. "Now we are getting on. Do you mind telling me about it?"

"I went for a walk with Mrs. Cutshaw after dinner. We took the road to the lake. About halfway there, I think, she scratched the hand in which she carried her handkerchief, on a thorn bush. At least, I think it was a thorn. Afterward she gave me the handkerchief to keep for her. It was forgotten in my pocket, until I found it a little while ago. This is it."

Marston drew from his pocket the little square stained with red, and placed it in the hand extended to receive it.

Dr. Ben opened and shook it lightly. Out dropped a bit of yellow; a scrap of fine fabric with a torn edge.

"What's this?" he asked, stooping to recover it.

"Something I picked up when I took a walk this morning," Marston explained. "It was caught on a rose-bush near the steps. I don't know why I kept it."

"I see." Dr. Ben held it in between thumb and

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forefinger for inspection by the company. "Has anybody here a dress made of cloth like this?"

Mrs. Carrington answered: "I don't think so, Dr. Ben."

He stowed the handkerchief and bit of cloth away in a capacious wallet, and studied the fire. Presently he observed, in a casual tone:

"I suppose that was the last you saw of her, Mr. Marston?"

"Yes, the last," Marston assented.

"And when was it?"

"When we came in from the walk after dinner. I didn't look at my watch."

The sharpness of the question drew an answer from Marston before he realized, with a flash of resentment, that Dr. Ben was checking up his replies.

"H'm. Well, I suppose that is all you can tell us." The Doctor was carelessly genial again. "Who saw her after she came in with Mr. Marston?"

Nobody answered, until Mrs. Carrington again came to the rescue. "I don't think anybody did, Dr. Ben. She sent her excuses to me, and went directly up-stairs. I went up myself, soon after, and knocked on her door. But she didn't answer. I suppose she didn't hear, or did not feel like seeing anyone. So I went on to my own rooms."

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"Then nobody saw her after that?" pursued Dr. Ben, putting the question generally.

"I did," said Carlotta.

She dropped the hand that seemed, as Marston watched her, to screen her from inquiry, and sat up in her chair; very straight, and also, it appeared to Marston, a little defiant.

"You did, Carlotta!" Helen Carrington spoke in obvious amazement.

"In her room."

Carlotta was not a loquacious witness.

"How did you happen to go there?"

"She asked me to come."

"Do you mind telling us what she wanted?"

"I can't."

Carlotta's lips were locked. With her head held high she faced her inquisitor defiantly.

"I wish you would." Dr. Ben's manner was fatherly. "It isn't just something I want to find out, you know. It's to help all of us get at the truth."

Still she faced him silently.

"You want to save Mr. and Mrs. Carrington from unnecessary embarrassment, don't you?"

"Yes," she answered, and looked at Helen pitifully.

"Then tell us, please, what Mrs. Cutshaw wanted to see you about."

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"I can't," she persisted.

"I see," Dr. Ben allowed indulgently. "It's some idea of honor that prevents. You were intimate friends?"

"I disliked her."

"H'm. You are very frank."

His blue eyes were inscrutable as he studied her flushed and agitated face, the while pulling his beard.

"Perhaps you will tell us how she seemed when last you saw her."

Carlotta hesitated—then answered firmly:

"She seemed very well."

"No sign of illness? And no injury you noted?"

"No."

"Now, Mrs. Hamlin, can't you tell us why you went to Mrs. Cutshaw's room?"

"I told you why. Because she asked me to come."

"But what did she want of you?"

"I can't tell you. I can't——" She broke off nervously.

"Very well, my dear," he said soothingly. "We'll get along without it. About what time do you think it was when you left her?"

"I didn't look at my watch afterward. But it was about ten o'clock when I went up to my room. I undressed then, and was nearly ready for bed

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when Mrs. Cutshaw telephoned. She was very anxious to see me for a few minutes. She asked whether I would rather go to her room, or have her come to mine. I preferred to make the call. You know," with a look that petitioned, "sometimes it is easier to leave yourself than to get someone else to do it."

"I know," assented Dr. Ben. "I suppose you regarded the call as urgent?"

"Otherwise, I should not have gone."

"I see. The call, I suppose, was by the house telephone system. No operator?"

"No. It was on a line anyone could use by putting in a plug for the desired room."

"Is that all you can tell us, Mrs. Hamlin?"

"I'm sorry. Yes."

"Thank you. I'm sorry I had to trouble you. You know you have given us some help."

Marston wondered if Dr. Ben's back was turned too quickly for him to note the effect of his closing words on Carlotta: "You know you have given us some help."

There was a frightened look in her eyes, and the knuckles of her clenched hands showed white.

Now Amy Stone and Roger Vincent were under observation. Marston had a feeling their interrogation was only serious to themselves.

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"I wonder," said Dr. Ben, jingling the keys in his pocket, "what we can learn from Miss Vincent and Mr. Stone. Did I get your names mixed?" as Mrs. Carrington corrected him. "Well, one would be easier to remember. Do you mind telling me, either of you, just what you know about Mrs. Cutshaw's death?"

Roger cleared his throat, and put his hand over Amy's protectively.

"If you please, sir," with unconscious reversion to a lad's manner with the schoolmaster, "I think I can speak for both Miss Stone and myself. We were in the music-room while Mr. Marston and Mrs. Cutshaw were strolling, last night; and remained together until after their return. I never saw Mrs. Cutshaw again. Nor did Miss Stone, I think."

"Never," she said, as he looked to her for confirmation.

"That," said Roger, with an air of relief in achievement, "is all we know."

"H'm," said Dr. Ben. "Thank you."

Staring into the fire, he softly jingled his keys. And still he stared till Carrington broke the somewhat oppressive silence.

"How about the rest of us?" he asked. "Don't we count?"

"Of course you do, Alfred. I'll begin with you."

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Dr. Ben was briskly professional again. "When did you see Mrs. Cutshaw the last time?"

"You mean alive?"

"Yes," Dr. Ben assented, "I mean alive."

"At dinner, last night. I didn't see her when she came in from her walk."

"And to-day?"

"I went up with Marston, at Helen's request, when Mrs. Cutshaw failed to appear at luncheon. The servants reported that she did not answer knocks on her door. We failed, too. Then I broke in the door. We found her lying as she was when you came up."

"You left the room as it was?"

"I didn't touch a thing."

"Is that also your recollection?" Dr. Ben looked at Marston. With nothing to account for the moved bookcase, he nodded assent.

"Now what is your theory, Alfred?"

"I haven't any."

With an effect of preparedness the answer rushed from Carrington's tongue.

Dr. Ben observed him with a curious little smile.

"I wonder if General Welles and Mr. Graves can help us."

Quickly Carrington answered for them: "Not unless they saw Fanny somewhere long after she went up-stairs. We played bridge till some time

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