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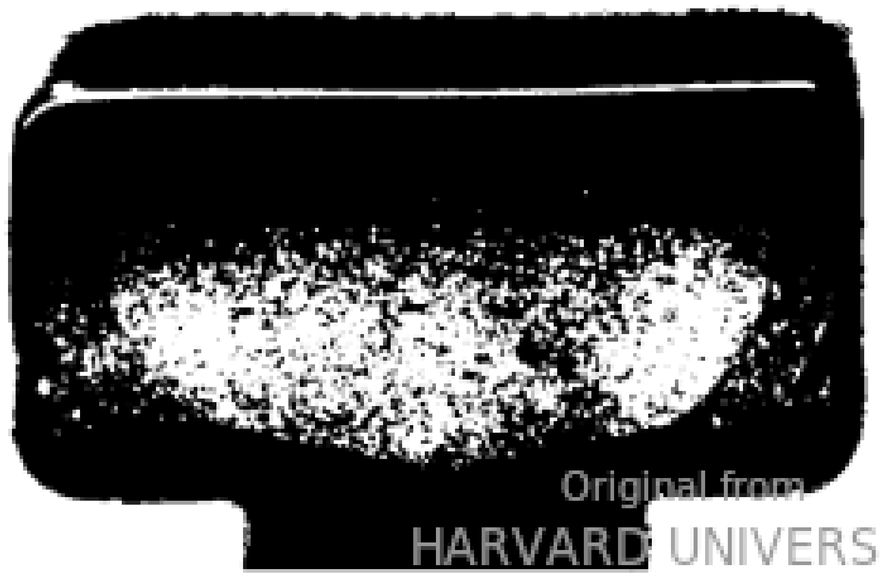

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ASHES TO ASHES

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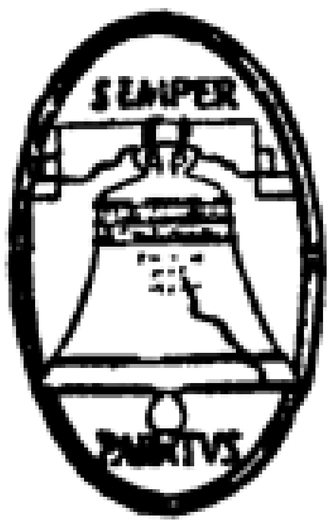
ASHES TO ASHES

— BY —

ISABEL OSTRANDER

Author of "THE ISLAND OF INTRIGUE",
"SUSPENSE" "THE CLUE IN THE AIR" *etc.*

"The Island of ..."



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ROBERT M. McBRIDE & CO.
1919

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	The Lie	1
II	The Trap	13
III	The Blow	24
IV	The Long Night	40
V	When Morning Dawned	53
VI	The Verdict	65
VII	The Letter	76
VIII	The Truth	88
IX	The Escape	100
X	A Chance Meeting	111
XI	Luck	124
XII	Mirage	137
XIII	The Black Bag	149
XIV	In His Hands	161
XV	Ashes to Ashes	175
XVI	The Second Vigil	187
XVII	Missing	196
XVIII	The Girl in the Watch Case	211
XIX	Found	224
XX	Marked	236
XXI	The Unconsidered Trifle	250
XXII	At the Club	263
XXIII	The Scourge of Memory	276
XXIV	If George Knew	289
XXV	The Final Test	299
XXVI	The Key	309
XXVII	In the Library	319
XXVIII	Just a Moment Please	323

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ASHES TO ASHES

CHAPTER I

"WELL, that's the situation." Wendle Foulkes' keen old eyes narrowed as they gazed into the turbulent ones of his client across the wide desk. "This last batch of securities is absolutely all that you have left of your inheritence from your father. Leave them alone where they are and you are sure of three thousand a year for yourself and for Leila after you."

Norman Storm struck the desk impatiently, and his lean, aristocratic face darkened.

"Three thousand a year! It wouldn't cover the running expenses of the car and our country club bills alone!" he exclaimed. "I tell you, Foulkes, this investment is a sure thing; it will pay over thirty per cent in dividends in less than four years. I have straight inside information on it—"

"So you had on all the other impulsive, ill-judged ventures that have wiped out your capital, Norman." The attorney sighed wearily. "I don't want to rub it in, but do you realize that you have squandered nearly four hundred thousand dollars in the past ten years on wildcat schemes and speculations? You've come to the end now; think it over. Your salary with the Mammoth Trust Company is fifteen thousand a year—on eighteen you and your wife ought to be living fairly comfortably. I grant you that three thousand

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income per anum isn't much to leave Leila in the event of your death, but it is better than the risk of utter insolvency, and she's been spending her own money pretty fast lately."

"It is hers, to do with as she pleases!" Storm retorted sulkily and then flushed as the school-boyishness of his own attitude was borne in upon his consciousness. "You cannot make big money unless you take a chance. I've been unlucky, that's all. My father made all his in Wall Street, and his father before him——"

"In solid investments, not speculations; and they were on the inside themselves. They had the capital to take a gambler's chance and the acumen to play the game." Foulkes rose and laid his hand paternally upon the younger man's shoulder. "Forgive me, my boy, but you haven't the temperament, the knowledge of when to stop and the strength to do it. Of course, this money is yours unreservedly; you may have it if you want to risk this last venture, but it will take some time for me to convert the securities into cash. Remember, you have reached the bottom of the basket; I only want you to stop and consider, and not to jeopardize the last few thousand you have in the world."

Outside in the bright May sunshine once more, Storm shouldered his way through the noon-tide throng on the busy pavement with scant ceremony, his resentment hot against the man he had just left. Confound old Foulkes! Why didn't he keep his smug counsels for those who came sniveling to him for them? As if he, an official of a huge and noted corporation, were a mere lad once more, to be lectured for over-spending his allowance!

The fact that the position he held with the trust company entailed no financial responsibility and was practically an honorary one, granted him solely because of his father's former connection with that institution, was a point which

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did not present itself to his mind. He was occupied in closing his mental eyes to the truth of the lawyer's arraignment, bolstering his defiance with excuses for the repeated fiascos of his past ventures, and the secret knowledge that Foulkes had read him aright only added fuel to the flames.

Still inwardly seething, he crossed Broadway and plunged into another narrow, crowded cross-street lined by towering office buildings whose walls rose like cliffs on either side. From the tallest of these, an imposing structure of white stone which reared a shaft high above its neighbors, a woman emerged and mingled with the hurrying host before him. She was not a toiler of the financial district; that was evident from the costly simplicity of the smart little toque upon her shining golden hair and the correct lines of her severely tailored costume. She was undeniably pretty with the delicate, tender irregularity of feature which just escapes actual beauty; yet it was not that which caused Norman Storm to halt and drove from him all thought of the late interview.

It was his wife. Leila! What possible errand could have brought her to the city and to this portion of it? Surely an unexpected one, for she had not told him of any such intention; indeed, to his knowledge she had never before invaded the precincts of finance, and he could conceive of no possible reason for her presence there.

As he paused, momentarily petrified with astonishment, a stout little man upon the opposite curb also caught sight of the young woman's hurrying figure, and he, too, stopped in surprise, a smile lighting his plain, commonplace features. Then, as though drawn by a magnet, his pale, rather faded blue eyes traveled straight to where Norman Storm stood, the surprise deepened, and with a half-audible exclamation he started across the street toward him; but a long double line of drays and motor trucks barred his way.

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Meanwhile Leila had vanished utterly in the crowd, and Storm realizing the futility of an attempt to overtake her, dismissed the matter from his thoughts with a shrug. She would tell him of her errand, of course, on his return home; and a conference of importance awaited his immediate presence at the office of the trust company.

The conference developed complications which delayed him until long after the closing hour, forcing him to forego an engagement with Millard for a round of golf at the country club. He likewise missed his accustomed train bearing the club car out to Greenlea and was compelled to herd in with commuters bound for the less exclusive suburban communities on the line.

Storm was not a snob, but the atmosphere of petty clerking and its attendant interests grated upon his tired, highly strung sensibilities; the unsatisfactory interview of the morning with Foulkes returned to exasperate him further and he was in no very genial frame of mind when he alighted at the station.

But Barker was on hand promptly with the smart little car which consumed such an incredible amount of gasolene, and the air of the soft spring twilight was infinitely grateful after the smoke and stuffiness of the train. As they drove swiftly past the rolling lawns of one spacious landscape garden after another, each burgeoning with its colorful promise of the blossoming year, his taut nerves relaxed, and he settled back in contented ease. What if he had been unlucky in past speculations, if old Foulkes did consider him an unstable weakling? Leila believed in him, and she was his, all his!

The glimmer of white upon the veranda half-hidden in the trees resolved itself into a slender, fairy-like figure, and as he alighted from the car and mounted the steps she caught

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his hands in the eager, childish way which was one of her chief charms.

"Oh, Norman, how late you are! Poor dear, did they keep him at that wretched old office and make him miss his golf?" She lifted her face for his evening kiss, and her soft, blue eyes glowed with a deep, warm light. "George is here; I mean, he 'phoned from the Millards'. He's coming over for dinner."

"That's the reason for the début of the new white gown, eh?" Storm laughed. "By Jove, I believe I ought to be jealous of old George! When a man's wife and his best friend——"

"Don't!" There was a quick note almost of distress in Leila's tones. "I don't like to hear you joke that way about him, dear. He seems so lonely, standing just outside of life, somehow. He hasn't anything of this!"

She waved her little hands in a comprehensive gesture as if to take in the whole atmosphere of the home, and her husband laughed carelessly once more.

"It's his own fault, then. Don't waste any sympathy on him on that score, Leila. George is a confirmed old bachelor; he would run a mile from a suggestion of domesticity." At the door he turned. "Oh, I say dear——"

But Leila was already down the steps and had started across the lawn, at the farther side of which Storm discerned a short stout commonplace figure approaching; and turning once more he hastened to his room to change.

George Holworthy, two years his senior, had been a classmate of Storm's at the university twenty years before, and the companionship—rather a habit of association than a friendship—which had grown up between the undisciplined, high-spirited boy and his duller, more phlegmatic comrade had proved a lasting one despite the wide dissimilarity in

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their natures. Storm was too fastidious, Holworthy too seriously inclined, for dissipation to have attracted either of them, but while the former had drifted, plunging recklessly from one speculation to another, the latter had plodded slowly, steadily ahead until at forty-two he had amassed a comfortable fortune and attained a position of established recognition among his business associates.

An hour later, as they sat drinking their after-dinner coffee on the veranda, Leila's words returned to his mind, and Storm found himself eying his guest in half-disparaging appraisal. Good, stupid old George! How stodgy and middle-aged he was getting to be! His hair was noticeably thin on top and peppered with gray and he looked like anything but an assured, successful man of affairs as he lounged, round-shouldered, in his chair, his mild eyes blinking nearsightedly at Leila, who sat on the veranda steps cradling one chiffon clad knee between her clasped hands.

George looked every day of fifty. Now, if he would only patronize a smart tailor, join a gymnasium and work some of that adipose tissue off, he wouldn't be half bad-looking. Unconsciously Norman Storm squared his shoulders and drew his slim, lithe form erect in his chair. Then his muscles tightened convulsively and he sat with every nerve tense, for a snatch of the disjointed conversation had penetrated his abstraction and its import stunned him.

"You weren't in town to-day, then?" The question, seemingly a repetition of some statement of Leila's, came stammeringly from Holworthy's lips.

"Oh, dear, no!" Her laugh tinkled out upon the soft air. "I haven't been in perfect ages! It doesn't attract me now that spring is here."

Not in town! But he had seen her himself! Sheer surprise held Storm silent for a moment.

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When he spoke his voice sounded strange to his own ears.

"Where were you all day, Leila? What did you do with yourself?"

"I—I lunched out at the Ferndale Inn with Julie Brewster." Her tone was low, and she did not turn her head toward him as she replied, adding hurriedly: "George, when are you going to give up those stuffy rooms of yours in town and take a bungalow out here? You can keep bachelor hall just as well; lots of nice men are doing it . . . "

Through the desultory talk which followed, Storm sat as if in a trance. If the blue tailored frock and hat with its saucy quill had not been familiar to him in every line, he could still not have mistaken that glimpse of her profile, the carriage of her head, the coil of shining, spun-gold hair. Ferndale Inn was twenty miles away, a good sixty from town, and inaccessible save by motor; she could not possibly have reached there in time for luncheon, for it was after twelve when she had passed him on that crowded, downtown street. She had told a deliberate falsehood; but why?

"I think if you don't mind, George, I'll say good night." Leila rose at last, her white gown shimmering in the darkness. "I feel a bit tired and headachey——"

"Not faint, Leila?" Holworthy spoke in quick solicitude.

"One of my old attacks you mean?" She laughed lightly. "Indeed, no! I haven't had one in ever so long. It is nothing that a good, early sleep won't put right. I suppose it is no use to ask you to stay overnight, George?"

He shook his head.

"Must be at the office early to-morrow. I'll catch the ten-forty train to town. Good night, Leila. Sleep well."

"Good night." She touched her husband's cheek softly with her finger-tips as she passed him, and he felt that they

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were icy cold. "Put on your coat if you go to the station with George, dear; these early Spring nights are deceptive."

Deceptive! And she, who had never lied to him before in the ten years of their married life, was going to her rest with a falsehood between them! Storm felt as if someone had struck him suddenly, unfairly between the eyes. The fact in itself was a staggering one, but a score of questions beat upon his brain. Why, if she wished to conceal her errand to town, had she not been content merely to deny her presence there? Why drag in the Ferndale Inn and Julie Brewster?

As if his thoughts had in some way communicated themselves to his companion, the latter asked suddenly:

"What sort of a place is this Ferndale Inn, Norman?"

"Oh, the usual thing. Imitation Arcadia at exorbitant prices. Why?"

"Oh, I've heard things." The tip of Holworthy's cigar described a glowing arc as he gestured vaguely. "I guess it is quiet enough; Leila wouldn't see anything wrong there in a million years unless she happened to run into some of her own set in an indiscreet hour. I'm informed that it is quite a rendezvous for those who are misunderstood at their own firesides."

"George, you're getting to be a scandal-monger!" Storm laughed shortly, his thoughts still centered on his problem. "The Inn is under new management this season, and anyway you needn't take a crack at our set out here. They're up-to-date, a bit unconventional, perhaps, but never step out of bounds. The trouble with you, old man, is that you're old-fashioned and narrow; you don't get about enough——"

"I get about enough to hear things!" Holworthy retorted with unusual acerbity. "Your crowd here at Greenlea is no different from any other small community of normal

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people thrown together intimately under the abnormal conditions created by too much money and not enough to do. I don't mean you two, but look around you. This Julie Brewster of whom Leila spoke just now; she is Dick Brewster's wife, isn't she? I don't discuss women as a rule, but she's going it rather strong with young Mattison. Dick's not a fool; he'll either blow up some day or find somebody's else wife to listen to his tale of woe and hand out the sympathy. That is merely a case in point."

"And just before your arrival, Leila was bemoaning the fact that you'd missed domestic happiness!"

"Was she? Well, there are different kinds of happiness in this world, you know; perhaps I've found mine in just looking on." He rose. "I'll get on down to the station now, old man. No, don't rout out Barker; I'd rather walk."

"I'll stroll down with you, then." Storm paused to light a cigarette, then followed his guest down the veranda steps. He shrank from facing Leila again that night; he would wait until the morning, and perhaps later she would explain. Perhaps the explanation of her prevarication lay in the fact of George's presence; whatever her errand, she might not have cared to discuss it before him. As this solution presented itself to his mind Storm grasped at it eagerly. That was it, of course! What a fool he had been to worry, to doubt her! He could have laughed aloud in sheer relief.

"This is a great little place you have out here, Norman." Holworthy halted at the gate to glance back at the house outlined in the moonlight. "I don't wonder you're proud of it. The grounds are perfect, too; that little corner there, where the hill dips down and the trout stream runs through, couldn't have been laid out better if you had planned it."

"It wouldn't be a little corner if that old rascal Jaffray would sell me that stretch of land which cuts into mine,

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confound him!" Storm plunged with renewed zest into a topic ever rankling with him. "I've tried everything to force his hand, but the scoundrel hangs on to it through nothing in the world but blasted perversity! I tell you, George, it spoils the whole place for me sometimes, and I feel like selling out!"

"Leave all this after the years you and Leila have put in beautifying it because you can't have an extra bit that belongs to someone else?" Holworthy shook his head. "Don't be a fool, Norman! If you can only get another head gardener as good as MacWhirter was——"

"I'll have MacWhirter himself back in a month," Storm interrupted. "Didn't Leila tell you? She saw him yesterday at the Base Hospital. He has lost a leg, but he'll stump around as well as ever on an artificial one, and if he had to be wheeled about in a chair Leila wouldn't hear of not having him back. She is the most loyal little soul in the world."

"Of course she is!" Holworthy assented hastily. "You're the luckiest man living, Norman, and she is the best of women!"

He paused abruptly, and when he spoke again there was an odd, constrained note in his usually placid tones.

"How about the South American investment? I wish you wouldn't go into it——"

"So, evidently, does Foulkes!" Storm retorted. "I had it out with him to-day, and the old pettifogger talked as though I were the original Jonah; told me to my face that I had no head for business——"

"Well, he's right on that," remarked the other, with the candor of long association. "This South American thing isn't sound; I've looked into it, and I know. The big fellows would have taken hold of it long ago if it had been worth

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while. You certainly cannot afford to take a chance where they won't."

The discussion which ensued lasted until the station was reached and Holworthy, with a final wave of his hand, disappeared into the smoker of the train which was just pulling out.

Storm had had rather the better of the argument, as usual, for the other's slower mind was not sufficiently agile to grasp his brilliant but shallow points and turn them against him, and he started homeward in high good humor. How peaceful and still everything lay under the pale shimmering haze of moonlight! Leila would be fast asleep by now. What a child she was at heart, in spite of her twenty-eight years! How she had hesitated, even over that little white lie that she had been to Ferndale Inn with Julie Brewster, and how stupid he had been to force it by questioning her before George!

The house as he approached it lay cloaked in darkness amid the shadow of the trees save only the subdued ray of light which shone out from the hall door, which in the custom of Greenlea he had left ajar. His footsteps made no sound on the soft, springing turf of the lawn, but when he reached the veranda the sharp, insistent shrill of the telephone came to his ears.

As he started forward it ceased abruptly, and to his amazement he heard Leila's voice in a murmur of hushed inquiry. The murmur was prolonged, and after a moment he slipped into the hall and stood motionless, unconscious of his act, listening with every nerve strained to the words which issued from the library.

"It is a frightful risk, dear! . . . I know, I've had to fib about it already to him . . . No, of course he doesn't, but what if others . . . . Yes, but he has only gone to the

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station with George Holworthy; he'll be back any minute, and then what can I say? . . . . Of course I will, I promised, but you must be mad! . . . Yes, in ten minutes."

Storm heard the receiver click and had only time to shrink back into the embrasure of the window when Leila emerged from the library, still clad in her dinner gown, and passing him swiftly, seized a long, dark cloak from the rack and sped noiselessly out of the door.

Storm's breath caught harshly in his throat, and he took an impetuous step or two after her. Then he halted, and with head erect and clenched hands he turned and mounted the stairs.

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CHAPTER II

THE TRAP

"DIDN'T you sleep well, dear? You look dreadfully tired." Leila's eyes fluttered upward to meet her husband's across the breakfast table and then lowered as she added hesitatingly: "I—I didn't hear you come in last night."

"No?" Storm gazed at her in studied deliberation as he responded. "I did not wish to disturb you."

She looked as fresh and sparkling as the morning, and the sudden wild-rose color which flooded her cheeks beneath his scrutiny heightened the charm of the picture she made; yet it sent a surge of hot resentment to his heart. Her solicitude was not for him, but in fear lest he had discovered her absence on that nocturnal errand!

He wondered at himself, at his stoic outward calm as he accepted his cup of coffee from her hands. Every fiber of him cried out to seize her hand and wring the truth from her lips, but the pride which had held him back from following her on the previous night still dominated him after sleepless hours of nerve-racking doubt. He would make sure of the truth without whining for explanations or dogging her footsteps.

Leila glanced at him furtively more than once as he forced himself to eat, then left her own breakfast almost untasted and turned with a sigh to the little pile of letters beside her plate. As she scanned them Storm saw her expression

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change, and she thrust one of the envelopes hastily beneath the rest; but not before his eyes had caught two words of the superscription upon the upper left hand corner.

"Leicester Building." That was the name of the sky-scraper from which he had seen her emerge on the previous day! His hands clenched and he thrust back his chair with a harsh, grating noise as he rose.

"I must go. I am late," he muttered thickly.

"But Norman, dear, Barker hasn't brought the car around yet." Leila, too, rose from her chair and with a quick movement thrust the tell-tale letter into her belt.

"No matter, I'll walk." He turned to the door with a blind instinct of flight before he betrayed himself. If his suspicions were after all capable of an explanation other than the one his jealous fury presented he would not play the fool. But he must know!

"Will you be home early this afternoon?" Leila bent to rearrange the daffodils in a low glass bowl as she spoke, and her face was averted from him. "Early enough for your golf, I mean?"

"No, I shan't be out here until late. Don't wait dinner for me." A swift thought came to him, and he added deliberately: "There is to be a special meeting at the club in town; I'll try to catch the midnight train, but in the event that I decide to stay over, I'll 'phone, of course."

She followed him out upon the veranda for his customary farewell kiss, but to his relief he spied a familiar runabout halting at the gate and escaped from her with a wave of his hand.

"There's Millard! I'll ride down with him. Good-bye."

Millard was a golf enthusiast, and his detailed description of the previous day's game lasted throughout the interval at the station, but it fell upon deaf ears.

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Storm's thoughts were in a turmoil. At one moment he felt that he could no longer endure the strain of the attitude he had assumed; that he must stop the train, rush back to his wife and demand from her the truth. At the next, his pride once more came uppermost; his pride, and the underlying doubt that his worst suspicions were actually founded on fact, which made him fear to render himself ridiculous in her eyes. It was true that she had lied about her presence in the city on the previous day, but she had gone openly to an office building at broad noon and left it alone. She had received a letter from someone in that building which she tried to keep from his observation, but her expression when she picked it up, although furtive, had not been guilty; rather, it had been full of pleased expectancy, as quickly masked. That visit, that letter might be simply explained, but the telephone call which he had overheard, the errand that had caused her, his wife, to steal from her house at midnight like a thief——!

There could be no other construction than the obvious one! He recalled her cool, unruffled assurance at the breakfast table, her charming air of solicitude at his own haggard appearance, and his blood boiled with rage. Did she think to deceive him, to keep him indefinitely in the state of fatuous complacency in which he had pitied other husbands? Was he to be spoken of, for instance, as George Holworthy had spoken of Dick Brewster the night before?

With the thought Storm glanced about him at his neighbors in the club car. If what he suspected were true, did any of them know already? Were any of them pitying him with that careless, half-contemptuous pity reserved for the deceived? He detected no sign of it, but the idea was like a knife turned in a wound, and he hurried from them as soon as the train drew in to the city station.

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There he found himself mechanically making his way toward the Leicester Building, with no very clear impression of what he meant to do on arrival. Among its myriad offices, representing scores of varied financial and commercial activities, he could scarcely hope to obtain a clue to the purpose of his wife's visit; and yet the place drew him like a magnet.

Within the entrance he halted before the huge directory board with its rows of names alphabetically arranged; halted, and then stood as though transfixed. Midway down the first column a single name had leaped out to him, and its staring letters of white upon the black background seemed to dance mockingly before his vision.

"Brewster, Richard E. Insurance Broker."

Dick Brewster! The husband of that light-headed, irresponsible little Julie, the very man to whom his thoughts had turned in the train not a half-hour since! The man of whom George Holworthy had spoken—and what was it that George had said?

"She's going it rather strong with young Mattison. Dick's not a fool; he'll either blow up some day or find somebody's else wife to sympathize——" Was that the solution? Could old George, obtuse as he was, have divined the truth and been trying in his stupid, blundering fashion, to warn him? Could it actually be that the woman who bore his name, who belonged to him, his property, had dared to flout his possession of her, to supplant him with another, to make of him a byword, a thing of pitying contempt?

How long he stood there before the directory he never afterward knew. He came dimly to realize at last that in the passing crowd which brushed by him more than one turned to stare curiously at him; and, turning, he stumbled blindly toward the elevator. Alighting at Brewster's floor,

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he made his way to the number which had been indicated opposite the name upon the board below, and, wrenching open the door, he strode into the office.

A languid stenographer looked up from behind her typewriter.

"Mr. Brewster won't be in town to-day. Do you want to leave any message?"

"No. I'll call again," Storm muttered. "Not—not in town to-day, you say?"

"He 'phoned just now from his country place; he'll be in to-morrow. Did you have an appointment with him?"

Storm shook his head, and, ignoring the card and pencil which the girl laid suggestively before him, he turned to the door.

"I'll call up to-morrow."

The elevator whirled him down to the street level once more, and as he made his way from the building his senses gradually cleared.

What an escape! That was his first thought. Had Brewster been there, in his uncontrollable rage he must have betrayed himself, given the other an opportunity to gloat over him! His fastidious soul writhed from the thought of a vulgar, sordid scene; yet the one thing in all his domineering life which he had been unable to master was his own temper, and he knew and secretly feared it. After all, suppose his wife had called at Brewster's office, that it was Brewster who had telephoned to her, Brewster whom she had gone at midnight to meet? Suppose the worst were true, these were all the facts he held with which to confront them; they could explain them away with some shallow lie and laugh in his very face! He must master himself, must bide his time until they should have played into his hands.

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He strode on abruptly, heedless of the direction, shouldering from his path those who crowded in against him, unconscious of aught save the struggle which was taking place within him.

That it should have been Dick Brewster, of all men! Brewster, with his dapper little mustache and weak, effeminate face! Yet he was goodlooking, damn him, and attractive to women; younger, too, almost as young as Leila herself. Was that what George had meant when he spoke of people being thrown together intimately with too much money and not enough to do? Had he been trying to excuse them on the score of propinquity? When Storm in his own easy, complacent sophistry had twitted the other with being old-fashioned, George had asserted, with what seemed now to have added significance, that he went about enough to "hear things". So this was what he had been driving at!

And Leila herself? At thought of her Storm felt his rage rising again in an overwhelming wave. Her tenderness, the years of their happiness, their love, were blotted out in the swift fury which consumed him at this affront to his pride, his dominance. Her beauty, her charm in which he had reveled almost as a personal attribute to himself, seemed all at once hideous, baleful to him. As her smiling face rose up before his memory he could have struck it down with his bare hands. If this despicable thing were true——!

He fought back the thought, succeeded at last in forcing a measure of calmness and dragged himself to his own office, where the interminable hours wore to a close. Then he went to a club; not that which he usually frequented when in town where the small-talk of his friends would madden him, but to an older, more sedate affair, a remnant of an earlier aristocracy to a membership in which his birth had

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automatically elected him. There he ordered a solitary meal and afterward sat in the somber, silent library with his eyes fixed upon the solemn clock. He had said that he would take the midnight train . . . .

Leila, after an equally solitary dinner had ensconced herself in her own dainty library at home that she might be near the telephone, should he call as he had tentatively suggested doing. No summons came, however, and it was after ten o'clock when a step sounded upon the veranda, and she sprang up, thrusting between the leaves of her book the letter over which she had been exulting; a letter which bore the superscription of the Leicester Building.

It was not her husband who stood before her when she opened the door. She paused, and then from the gloom of the veranda a voice spoke reassuringly:

"It is I, Mrs. Storm; Dick Brewster. I hope you and Norman will pardon the lateness of this call, but I must see you, if you will grant me a few minutes." His quiet, pleasantly modulated voice seemed oddly shaken, and a quick constraint fell also upon Leila's manner, but she held the door wide.

"Come in, of course, Mr. Brewster. My husband is not at home yet, and I am waiting up for him. You—you wanted to see him?"

"No. That is, I wished especially to see you."

He followed her into the library and took the chair she indicated, while she seated herself in her own once more and regarded him with an air of grave, troubled inquiry. His face was pale, and beneath the glow of the lamp she saw that it was working as though with some strong emotion, although he strove to remain calm.

"Mrs. Storm, I want to ask you a personal question, and I hope you will not be offended. I should not have intruded

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at this hour, I should not have come to you at all, if your reply had not been vital to me. Will you tell me where you were yesterday?"

Leila laughed lightly but with an unmistakable note of confusion.

"That is a very simple question, Mr. Brewster. I was with Julie. We motored out to the Ferndale Inn——"

"Alone, Mrs. Storm?"

"Alone, of course. We went with Julie's new roadster." She paused, and then the words came in a little rush. "We didn't start out with any—any definite object, but it was such a beautiful day and it grew late, almost noon before we knew it, and we found ourselves further from home than we had realized, so we 'phoned back—at least, I did——"

"Where did you 'phone from?"

"From the Inn, when we decided to stop there for lunch. But really, Mr. Brewster, I cannot quite understand——"

"I will explain in a moment. Tell me, was anyone there at the Inn whom you knew?"

Leila hesitated, biting her lips.

"The—the Featherstones——"

"Did you see them, Mrs. Storm?"

"No, I—I had gone to the dressing-room to rearrange my hair, and when I rejoined Julie she told me they had just left."

"I see." Brewster nodded slowly. "Will you answer one more question, please? How did you reach home?"

"Why, the way we came, of course, in Julie's car." Leila's voice trembled slightly and her eyes wavered.

"*You* did not, Mrs. Storm." His tone was gently deferential, but there was a note of finality in it which she could not combat.

"Not all the way," she amended hurriedly. "Julie dropped

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me at the house of some friends of mine over on Harper's Ridge, and they brought me home later."

He shook his head.

'You did not leave the Ferndale Inn with Julie."

"Mr. Brewster!" Leila rose. "I have listened to you and I have answered your questions very patiently, but now I must ask you to excuse me. You have no right to question me, my conduct is no concern of yours——"

"Except where it touches upon my wife's." Her guest, too, had risen, and although he spoke quietly his voice quivered. "Your story is substantially the same as hers, but you both ignored one detail—that the Featherstones might have caught a glimpse of her companion and that others might have seen them both leave the Inn. Please believe, Mrs. Storm, that I am not attempting to censure you. Your loyalty to my wife, your effort to shield her is very praiseworthy from the standpoint of friendship, but there is something holier than that which has been violated."

"Oh, not that!" Leila cried. "Julie hasn't done anything really wrong! You must believe that, Mr. Brewster! Oh, I warned her not to go, that it was foolishly indiscreet!"

"Yet she went." Brewster's lips twisted in a wry smile. "I only came here to learn the truth beyond possibility of a mistake. I won't detain you any longer."

He bowed and turned to the door, but Leila sprang forward and caught his arm.

"Oh, what are you going to do?"

Brewster drew himself up, and his slight, dapper figure assumed a sudden dignity it had not borne before.

"I am going to turn her out of my house! To send her to this puppy, Mattison, whom she loves!"

"She doesn't! Mr. Brewster, you must listen to me, you shall! You are on the point of making a terrible mistake,

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a mistake that will wreck both your lives!" Leila pleaded frantically. "Julie is not in love with Ted Mattison! It is only a flirtation; that luncheon yesterday was the merest escapade——"

"Like the other luncheons and motor trips and têtes-a-tête which have made her the talk of Greenlea for weeks past, while I was supposed to be blind and deaf and dumb?" Brewster shook off his hostess' detaining hand. "I have reached the end now——"

"But she hasn't. Will you drive her to it? She is young, only a girl, and irresponsible, but she is innocent now of any actual wrong. What if she is infatuated for the moment with Ted Mattison? It isn't love, I know that, and you—oh, I have no right to say it, but you have come to me and I cannot let you go without opening your eyes to the truth! You have neglected her for your new business, left her alone and lonely, forced her to seek companionship elsewhere. You are at least equally to blame for the situation, and now, instead of driving her from you for a mere indiscretion, now when she needs you most, you owe it to her and to yourself to win her back; not *take* her back patronizingly, forgiving and magnifying her fault, but win her, regain the love you have almost lost!" Leila paused and added softly: "You love her, and she cares for you in her heart. She is only deeply hurt at your neglect, and I think she began this affair with Ted in a childish effort just to pay you back. She is only waiting a word to turn to you again. Will you speak that word? You have your great chance now, to-night, for happiness or misery, to save her or to drive her to despair. Will you let this chance pass you by forever?"

There was a pause, and then Brewster turned away, his head bowed.

"I love her, God knows!" he groaned. "You may be

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right about neglect; I never thought of that, I was only working for her! If I could only believe that there was still a chance——! But I have heard and seen too much, things have gone too far——"

"They haven't. You must believe me!" Leila followed him a step or two and then halted. "Julie has been foolish, but no more. You admit that you still love her; then go home and tell her so. Tell her every day, over and over, until she believes *you* again, and realizes that her happiness lies with you."

Brewster turned once more, his head held high, and the tears glistened unashamed in his eyes.

"I will, Mrs. Storm! You can never know what you have done for me, for us both! I came here to-night the most miserable of men, but you have shown me the way to happiness again."

Leila gave him both her hands with a glad little cry.

"Oh, I knew that you would understand, that you would see! I have done nothing, it is you yourself——"

"You have made me the happiest man in the world! I shall always remember my hour here to-night with you, and if ever doubt comes to me again, if my faith wavers, I shall think of what you have given me!"

He bent reverently and kissed her hands, and she bowed her head, the happy tears glistening in her own eyes.

Neither of them were aware of the soft opening and closing of the front door, neither saw the figure which halted for a moment in the doorway behind them, in time to catch the last speech which fell from Brewster's lips and witness the salutation which concluded it; neither of them heard the muffled, almost noiseless footsteps as the figure withdrew as silently as it had come and disappeared in the further recesses of the house.

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CHAPTER III

THE BLOW

IN his little den at the rear of the house Storm closed the door softly before, with shaking fingers, he sought the chain of the low light upon his desk. Then, dropping into a chair beside it, he raised clenched fists to his head as though to beat out the hideous confirmation which drummed at his brain.

It was true! His wife had betrayed him. That soft, pliant, docile thing of pink and white flesh which in his fatuous idolatry he had believed imbued with the soul of loyalty had slipped airily from his grasp, given herself, her love to another!—Love! What did she know of love or loyalty? This creature whom he had honored had dragged, was dragging his name in the dust, setting him aside as an unimportant factor, a mere dispenser of bounty to be cajoled and tolerated for his generosity, his protection, while she indulged her desires for fresh admiration, new conquests!

Curiously enough, his enmity was not active against the man he believed to be his rival. Brewster, for the moment, was a secondary consideration in his eyes; had it not been he it would have been another. The woman was to blame!

How blind she must think him! How easily she had fallen into the first simple trap he had laid for her feet! How in her fancied security, she must be laughing at him! The little acts of wifely forethought and service, evidences of which surrounded him even there in his sanctum, were but

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as particles of sand thrown in his eyes! His humidor freshly filled, his golf sticks of last year cleaned and laid out across the table that he might choose which ones to take to the country club for the opening of the new season!—Faugh! Did she hope by such puerile trivialities as these to prolong his unquestioning faith in her.

Against his will, the past came thronging to his mind in ever-changing scenes which he strove in vain to shut out. That summer at Bar Harbor, the moonlit nights, the little, golden-haired maid just out of school. . . . How fast and furious his wooing had been! The dim, rustling, crowded church, the Easter lilies which banked the altar—God! he could smell their cloying fragrance now!—that radiant, fairy-like white figure moving slowly toward him down the aisle . . . .

Storm groaned, and involuntarily covered his eyes as other pictures formed before his mental vision. Their honeymoon at the Hot Springs, that brilliant first season in town, and then her sudden illness and the dark weeks during which he had feared that she would be taken from him and he had crouched in impotent supplication before the door he might not enter. Than that exultant moment when he learned that his prayers had been answered, that she would live; poor fool, what thanks he had given!

Her convalescence had seemed to draw them more closely, tenderly together even than before; and pitilessly, mockingly his thoughts ranged through the quiet, happy years which had followed in the planning and beautifying of their home; this home which she had desecrated!

Brewster's words rang in his ears. "You have made me the happiest man in the world! I shall always remember my hour here to-night with you—" And then that adoring salutation, that impassioned kissing of her hands!

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Checking the harsh laugh which rose to his lips and unable longer to contain himself, Storm sprang up and paced the floor. Brewster's happiness would be of short duration; his hour was over! Softly, under his breath, Storm began to curse them both with horrible, meaningless curses; blood surged to his temples, pounded in his ears. A lurid red mist rose before his eyes, blinding him so that he staggered, stumbling against the furniture in his path. He, Norman Storm, had been flouted, betrayed; and by that smiling, lying, corrupt creature there beneath his roof whom he had trusted, idolized!

All at once through the roaring in his ears he heard his name called in wondering accents and turned. The door had opened, and Leila stood before him; a pale and trembling Leila, with wide, apprehensive eyes.

"Norman! When did you come in? Why do you look at me so strangely? What has happened?"

The mist cleared before him, the leaping blood was stilled as though a cold hand had tightened about his temples, and in a voice of dangerous calm he replied: "A great deal has happened. For one thing, I have found you out, my dear!"

"'Found me out?'" she repeated advancing toward him in sheer wonderment. "Norman, what do you mean?"

"I returned home somewhat earlier than you expected, did I not?" He smiled, but the light in his eyes grew steely. "A trite, time-worn trick of the deceived husband, I admit, but it served! You thought yourself secure, didn't you? Or perhaps you gave no thought whatever to my possible intrusion; you fancied you had sufficiently pulled the wool over my eyes to blind me indefinitely?"

"Deceived husband!" Her voice had sunk to a whisper of incredulous horror. "You cannot know what you are saying, Norman. You must be mad!"

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"On the contrary, I have never known a saner moment. My madness lay in trusting you as I have all these years, loving you with an idolatry which could conceive of no wrong."

"But I—I have done no wrong——"

"Don't lie now!" he cried harshly. "Can't you realize that it will avail you nothing, that it did not deceive me even yesterday? And to-night I come home and find your lover here beneath my roof thanking you for the happiest hour of his life!"

"My——!" Leila shuddered and drew herself up abruptly. "Norman, you go too far! The construction you have placed on Mr. Brewster's visit here to-night would be ridiculous, ludicrous under the circumstances if it were not so hideous, so unspeakably vile! I will leave you until you come to your senses."

She turned, but he sprang before her and locking the door dropped the key into his pocket.

"You will stay here! I'm through with evasions. We're going to have this out between us here now. You went to the Ferndale Inn with Julie Brewster yesterday, didn't you?"

Leila eyed him steadily for a moment, then her eyelids drooped and she moistened her lips nervously.

"I have told you——"

"A lie! You were not at the Ferndale Inn yesterday, you were in New York, in the Leicester Building, in that rat Brewster's office!"

"Brewster's office!" she repeated. Then comprehension dawned, and she smiled sadly with infinite reproach. "Norman, you will regret that accusation bitterly when you learn the truth."

"I know it now." His tones shook, but a strange, tense calm had settled upon his seething brain, and even as he

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voiced his accusations a monstrous resolve was forming within him. "You received a letter from there this morning which you tried to hide from me. Couldn't your poor, pitiful, complacent mind conceive that a mere child would have seen through your evasions and shallow subterfuges?"

"Stop! Stop!" She retreated from him with her hands over her ears as if to shut out the sound of his voice. "I tell you, you are mad! I can explain——"

"It's too late for that." His tone had steadied, and a hint of his dawning, implacable purpose glinted in his eyes. "You called him 'mad' last night, too, over the telephone, yet you called him 'dear' also, and when he held you to your promise you stole out of my house to meet him in the darkness, like a thief. You did not know that I stood listening, close enough to have touched you as you passed!"

"This is infamous!" Leila turned upon the hearth rug and faced him, her head proudly erect to meet the menace in his eyes. "You were eavesdropping, spying upon me in your insane, unfounded jealousy and suspicion! Why did you not follow me as well? Then you would have learned the truth for yourself!"

"It was not necessary. It was sheer accident that I came upon you at the telephone, but I did not have to dog your footsteps to learn the truth. My judgment was better than yours; I knew that you would walk into the first trap I set for you, that you would give yourself into my hands. And you have!"

"You will unlock that door and permit me to go now, if you please." The quiet dignity of her tone was filled with cold contempt. "You are beside yourself; I will not listen a moment longer to your wild accusations, your insults! I have offered to explain, but you said it was too late. Take care that you do not make it forever too late!"

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Storm read disdain in the defiance of her eyes, mockery in the faint curl of her lips, and his swift resolve crystallized.

"It is you who have made it too late! Take that damnable smile from your lips, do you hear?" As he advanced toward her his outflung hand touched something smooth and hard, and closed upon it. "I tell you I've caught you, I've found you out! You've had your hour, you and the man for whom you deceived me! I'll settle with him later, but now you'll pay!—Damn you, stop smiling!"

Blindly in the sudden unleashing of his rage he struck, and the small, colorless face with its tantalizing, disdainful curl of the lips vanished as though the red swirling mist which rose again before him had closed over it and blotted it out.

No sound reached him at first but the drumming of the pulse in his ears and his hoarse, sobbing breath as he stood swaying, tearing with one free hand at the collar which seemed tightening about his throat. Then gradually for the second time the lurid haze lifted, and as the space before him cleared a great trembling seized him.

"Stop smiling! Stop smiling! Stop smiling!"

What queer, grating whisper was that which repeated the words endlessly over and over in unison with the throbbing in his brain? Dimly he became aware that it issued from his own lips and moved his hands up from his throat to still the sound.

His other hand still grasped the smooth, hard object upon which it had closed in that moment of vengeance, and now he gazed down stupidly upon it. It was a driver, one of that collection of golf clubs from the table, and upon its glittering, rounded, hardwood knob was a smudge of red . . . .

His wavering gaze traveled on and downward. Then it

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fastened upon something which lay at his feet, and slowly his face stiffened and grew leaden.

It was Leila, huddled and still, with one side of her forehead blotted out in a crushed, oozing mass of crimson.

The driver dropped with a soft thud from his relaxed hand, and he knelt, lifting the limp body which sagged so horribly, with such unexpected weight. Shaking as he was, he managed to raise it to a half sitting posture, the shoulders supported against his knee; but as, mechanically, he whispered her name, the head rolled back, its jaw hanging grotesquely; and from between the half-crossed lids her eyes stared dully back at him in a cold, fixed, basilisk gaze.

As confirmation came to him, the body slipped from his nerveless grasp and with a soft, silken rustle rolled over and fell face downward, settling into the hearth rug with the dishevelled golden head against the fender.

He had killed her! He meant to do it, of course; he had been conscious of that resolve before she defied him, while she had stood there vainly striving to maintain her attitude of injured innocence; but now he realized that it must have been his unacknowledged intention from the moment suspicion changed to conviction. The stupendous fact, however, and the consequences which it portended, held him suddenly at bay.

He had committed murder, and he would be called upon to pay the penalty! It was not death he feared——how easily it had been meted out, there in that little room!—but the dragging, infernal machinery of legalizing his punishment; the trial, the publicity, the hideous disgrace, the sordidness of the whole wretched proceeding!

No tinge of grief or remorse colored his thoughts. She had wronged him, had richly deserved what had come to her. That dead thing lying there had become simply a men-

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ace to his own life, and the immediate future in all its horrors ranged before his mental vision. The discovery, the arrest, the stark headlines in the papers——Wall Street, the Trust Company, the clubs, all his world ringing with it! Then the legal battle, long drawn out, the sentence, the weeks of tortured waiting in an ignominious cell and at last the end, hideous, inevitable!

How life-like she looked, lying there, lying there with no hint of the tell-tale wound visible! She might almost have fainted and slipped from that huge armchair behind her with her head against the fender . . . .

Why could she not have fallen so to-night? The thought seared across his brain like a flash of lightning, and Storm drew his breath in sharply. He was safe, so far! No one knew of what had taken place in that room; no one knew yet that he had even returned to the house. Brewster had not seen him, and Brewster was the only living person who could suspect a motive for the crime.

A motive? But what was he thinking? There would be no question of motive, for there would be no suggestion of crime. Since childhood Leila had been a victim of petit mal, that mild form of catalepsy which, while it baffles cure, yet is in itself not harmful; a moment of faintness, of unconsciousness followed by slight weakness, that was all. Everyone knew of these attacks of hers; George Holworthy had referred to that tendency only last night when she had complained of feeling not quite herself. The chance that she might injure herself in falling when the fainting spell came was the sole danger attached to her old malady. That danger was what must seem to have overtaken her to-night!

Storm rose weakly, his eyes averted from the thing lying there upon the floor, and strove with all his mental force to collect himself. She had come here to his den and seated

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herself in that chair to await his return. Faintness had overcome her, and she had fallen forward, striking her temple there on the heavy brass knob on the corner of the fender. That was the solution, that was what the world must think, must believe without question.

And he? What must be his part in this drama which he was staging? Not an active one; caution whispered to him to keep as much in the background as would be consistent. He must remember to eliminate this hour wholly from his calculations; this hour and the events which had led up to it. He knew nothing of her visit to the Leicester Building in town; of the telephone summons, her secret nocturnal meeting with Brewster, the letter she had tried to conceal or the fellow's visit there that evening. Only by erasing from his future train of thought all such memories could he hope to succeed in conducting himself down to the smallest detail as though all had been as usual between them.

In the ordinary course of events, on returning as late as this and finding the house dark—for the single low light in the den far at the rear of the house would not be calculated to attract his attention—he would have concluded that Leila had long since gone to bed, and would himself retire without disturbing her. In the early morning the housemaid would discover what lay in the den and raise the alarm.

He would then have only to play the rôle of the dazed, grief-stricken husband, and none—not even Brewster—would suspect. There would be the formality of a medical examination, the funeral, the conventional condolences, and soon their little world would forget.

What was that! Was there a stir, a vibration from somewhere in the house above? A cold sweat broke out at every pore, and fear gripped him, but he flung it off and tiptoed

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to the door, turning the knob and striving to open it. Then he remembered, and taking the key from his pocket unlocked the door and pulled it toward him inch by inch. Except for the pin-point of light from the lamp on the newel post at the foot of the staircase, the house was in absolute darkness, and his straining ears detected no repetition of that sound, if sound there had been.

Closing the door at length, Storm set himself resolutely to the task which remained before him. At his feet lay the driver where he had dropped it when the full realization of his act swept over him. There had been a smudge upon it——God! had it marked the rug?

Before he touched it, however, he went to the window, assured himself that no aperture between its heavy curtains would permit a ray of stronger light to be visible from within, and then switched on the wall brackets, flooding the room with a dazzling radiance.

Next he examined the driver itself. The blow had been delivered with the rounded knob, and to the sinister clot of red upon it there adhered a single golden hair which glinted accusingly in the light. Storm plucked it off with trembling fingers and approaching the hearth coiled it over the knob on the corner of the fender, close to that shining, inert head.

Then with his handkerchief he wiped the driver carefully, polishing it until even to his super-critical eye it appeared immaculate once more, and replaced it among the others on the table.

Shudderingly, he glanced down at the square of linen crushed in his hand, and as his fingers slowly opened a hideous crimson stain appeared. It seemed to his horrified gaze to be growing, spreading, and he felt an almost irresistible impulse to cast it wildly from him. Her blood! Her

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life-blood, still warm and red and all but pulsing as it had come from her veins!

To his distorted imagination it seemed to be still a part of her, and alive, clinging to his hand in futile, mute appeal. It must be obliterated, must cease to be! That inert body could not accuse him; the driver lay in spotless seeming innocence among its fellows; even that single golden hair which might have proved his undoing had been made to serve as a link in the circumstantial chain he was forging; but this most damning evidence of all remained! He must rid himself of it at once, must destroy it utterly! But how?

The stout linen would not tear easily, and even though he ripped it apart the torn strips would still bear their revealing stains; if he took it to his room and washed it there would be no place where he could hang it to dry without Agnes finding it, and she would think such a proceeding strange. Moreover every instinct within him shrank from the thought of pocketing the gruesome thing and clamored for its destruction.

Dared he burn it? What if the betraying odor lingered in the room? To start a blaze in the fireplace which had been swept clean for the coming summer was not to be thought of, yet burning was the only means left to him.

His roving glance fell upon the desk. There lay the sealing wax, tray and spirit lamp with which it had been his pride to stamp the Storm coat of arms upon his letters. In an instant he had touched a match to the tiny wick, and a flame, narrow and curling like a bluish, tinseled ribbon, sprang into being.

He waited until it had steadied, and then at arm's length he dipped a corner of the handkerchief into the flame and held it there. God, how it smoked! The linen charred slowly at the edges as the blue tongue of fire licked it hun-

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grily, and a pungent odor permeated his nostrils, but no answering flame appeared. Would it never catch?

At last a tiny dart of red shot out and ran around the border, and Storm snuffed out the wick and held the handkerchief over the little bronze tray. Slowly, creepingly the tiny flame ate into the linen, and flakes of fine light ash drifted down into the receptacle beneath. The sinister stains still stood out glaringly in the curling smoke, and as though possessed of a very demon the flame eluded them, skirting about them in sheer mockery. Would even the elements defy him in his plan?

Then the crimson turned to brown, and a darker curl of smoke arose, while a strange, acrid odor mingled with the dry smell of burning linen. Her blood was being consumed there before him, just as her body would later be consumed by the earth in which it would lie! A thought of the ancient human sacrifice came to him, and he trembled anew. This blood-stained rag, this symbol of her living body, was being offered on the altar of his self-preservation!

The flakes were dropping now like sifting, gray-white down, and the handkerchief was a mere wisp. Slowly the brown stains crumbled and disappeared and the smoke lightened, but that dreadful, sinister odor still lingered. Thread by thread the linen was consumed, but Storm held the last shred until the diminished flame seared his fingers, then dropped it into the tray and stood watching it with somber eyes until the lingering flame died and only the little heap of ashes remained.

Gone! That hideous, accusing stain had been swept into nothingness, obliterated by the breath of clean fire. Only that unclean odor still prevailed, and the contents of the tray must be disposed of. If the room were subjected to a minute examination and the ashes analyzed, all that he had done

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would go for naught. If he could scatter them, sow them to the winds——

Storm listened. The night breeze was rising, blowing briskly, strongly about the house. Without, the flower garden and broad lawns with a border of hedge and clustering trees screened him from his neighbors. With a quick gesture he switched off the lights and tiptoed to the window, thrusting back the curtains and opening it wide. The fresh, sweet, blossom-laden air rushed in upon him, and he breathed it in great gulps before he turned and felt his way to the desk.

Picking up the little bronze tray he turned to the window and stood for a moment gazing out. Under the pale glow of the rising moon, Leila's flowers which she had tended with such loving care lay sleeping tranquilly, their small myriad faces glistening beneath a spangled veil of dew. She had brought them into being, and now her ashes, these ashes which held a part of her, were to fertilize and give them renewed life!

He thrust the thought from him in a paroxysm of physical revulsion, and as a gust of wind swept about the house he cast the contents of the tray far into the air. It seemed to him that he could see the ashes, swirling like a faint, driven mist before him, settling lingeringly among the flowers, and he stared half-fearfully as though anticipating that a phantom would rise from them; but the sudden gust of wind died, and the garden slept on, unconcerned.

The tray, swept clean of the last flake, shimmered faintly in his hand, and he replaced it on the desk. Then, seizing the window curtains, he waved them about until even his overstimulated senses could detect no lingering whiff of smoke. Closing the windows at last, he drew the curtains as carefully as before and switched on the lights.

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The first thing that met his blinking gaze was the burnt match with which he had lighted the spirit lamp, and he thrust it into his pocket as he bent to examine the desk top. No single flake of ash remained to bear witness against him, and with a sigh he turned to the work yet before him.

He had marked the exact spot upon the rug where the impromptu weapon had rested; but here, too, a prolonged scrutiny revealed no slightest trace, and he arose from his knees with a sigh of relief.

After all, he was not preparing for a rigid police inquiry; only the most casual inspection would be given the room, with the cause of death so self-evidently manifested, yet the slightest overlooked clue would bring crashing down upon him the whole circumstantial structure he was so painstakingly erecting.

Was that armchair in the exact position from which the body would have fallen?

He studied it, moved it an inch or two, and then turned his attention to the body itself. The wound was upon the right temple, and, shuddering, he raised the head and rested it upon the corner of the fender. It settled back upon the rug once more as he released it, but he saw to his satisfaction that the knob of brass was no longer bright; a smear of crimson marred its surface, and a loosened strand of her hair trailed over the fender into the hearth.

As Storm stepped backward to regard his handiwork something metallic grated against his heel. A gold hairpin! He picked it up meditatively. Had Leila really fallen forward that pin, jarred from her head by the force of the impact, would have shot across the fender; he reached over and dropped it upon the hearth.

No flaw remained now in the scene he had arranged, and with its consummation a traitorous wave of horror rose

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within him, an hysterical desire almost of panic to flee from that silent, sinister room. He switched off the wall brackets, and approached the desk. His hat and gloves were all that remained to indicate his presence, and he caught them up and reached out to extinguish the low reading lamp before remembrance stayed his hand.

The housemaid must find the lamp still burning brightly in the morning when she came to set the room to rights. Was his nerve failing him that he should have almost overlooked so vital a detail? The horror was mounting now, but he forced himself to a final, searching survey; his hideous task was accomplished!

A few hurried, cautious steps, a moment of hesitation, and he stood at last outside the door. He felt an overmastering impulse to close it, to seal that room and its gruesome contents away from the living world, but he reminded himself sternly that it would not be a logical move. Leila, awaiting his coming, would have left the door ajar that she might hear him. He reached behind him and drew it close to its casing until only a narrow line of light cleaved the darkness with dimmed radiance; then, repressing a mad desire to run, he tiptoed noiselessly down the hall.

At the foot of the stairs he paused and glanced back. Only the faintest lightening of the shadows betrayed what lay beyond, and extinguishing the lamp upon the newel post he crept up to his room.

From Leila's empty dressing-room adjoining, the yawning blackness seemed to rush out menacingly to envelop him, but he shut it away with the closing door and, moving to his window, flung it wide.

Soft moonlight everywhere, silvering the treetops and shimmering upon the trout stream beyond. Moonlight and

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the whispering night winds and the peace and hush of a sleeping world.

It was over! He had done his utmost to forestall any possible doubt or suspicion, had nullified every clue, had set the scene for the farce which would start with the rising curtain of dawn and felt confident that he was prepared at all points to meet the issue.

But what of the hours that lay between, the long night before him?

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CHAPTER IV

THE LONG NIGHT

STORM turned from the window with a sudden realization that his task, instead of having been finished, had only begun. If he were to keep up this farce it would not be enough to attempt to obliterate from his memory the hour which had just passed; he must live from this moment as though it had never been. He must remember that, tempted by the beauty of the spring night, he had not come directly home by way of the short cut, but had chosen the winding path which skirted the club grounds and the lake. That would account for the time that had elapsed since the arrival and departure of the train.

He had only just come in, and finding the house dark had proceeded at once up here to his room. He would suppose Leila to be asleep in there, behind that closed door, and he would therefore move about softly, so as not to waken her. Every nerve shrank in revolt from the thought of retiring, of courting sleep and the nightmares which might arise from his subconsciousness to haunt him, yet he must proceed in all things as though this were but a usual homecoming.

He must at least prepare for bed. He reached for the pendant chain of the reading lamp and then paused. The servants' rooms were directly above; what if the bright square of light shining from his open window awoke one of them and she came downstairs? The next minute he was cursing

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himself beneath his breath. Was his light not often going as late as this, or later, and had he ever before paused to think or care whether it disturbed the servants or not? To-night must be as all other nights! Why could he not bear that in mind?

Nevertheless, he crossed to the window once more and closed the shutters; that concession, at least, was not an unusual precaution, for an early night moth or two, lured by the prematurely warm weather, had already made its appearance. Then he turned on the light resolutely and started to undress. The suit he was wearing was of dark blue serge with a white pin-head stripe, and as he divested himself of it a new thought sprang up to his mind. Suppose it, too, bore traces——? That head with its shattered, gaping wound had rested against his knee. . . .

Seizing the garments he moved close to the bed-stand, and beneath the powerful rays of the lamp he examined every thread with straining eyes. No stain was visible; even his shirt cuffs by a miracle had escaped contact, and with a sigh of relief he plunged his hands in the various pockets to remove his keys and small change.

The first object his fingers touched was the burnt match with which he had ignited the spirit lamp, and impatiently he filliped it out of the window.

Everything was there in his pockets which he normally carried except his handkerchief. That was gone, reduced to ashes and flung to the winds of the night; but it would not have been had his homecoming been as he must pretend even to himself.

Storm frowned. He would in all likelihood never wear that suit again; even if it were not for the fact that mourning garb alone must be his for many months to come, he could still never look upon it again, remembering . . . .

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He thrust that thought violently aside and continued with his reasoning. Agnes always went through the pockets of the clothes he had worn during the week for stray handkerchiefs when she was collecting the laundry. Would she note that he had used one less than usual?

It was not so much the fear of that, however, as the mental urge to play up to his part, to make all things seem as though that hour in the den had never been, that prompted Storm to go to his dresser and take a fresh handkerchief from the drawer. Without effeminacy, his fastidious taste inclined toward a dash of delicate scent, and several varieties stood before him.

Testatively he lifted a bottle of rose toilet water, but the first whiff of fragrance made him replace it with a shudder. It brought back too vividly the remembrance of that garden below where the opening buds were even now scattered with filmy ashes. The lilac water he also thrust aside—Leila had met him at the gate only a week before with her arms filled with white lilac, and as she stood there, her head looming fair and golden above them, he had thought her very like a picture of the Annunciation . . . .

Finally he sprayed a few drops of eau de Cologne on the handkerchief and stuffed it in the pocket of his coat lying across the chair. Then, clad in his pajamas, he glanced at the clock on the mantel.

Half-past twelve! It would be half-past six in the ordinary course of events when Agnes would descend to dust the first floor and set the breakfast table. Six hours to wait! Three hundred and sixty slow, dragging minutes! How could he ever live through them? How did the condemned spend the last hours before the end? He had read, marveling, that some hardy criminals slept unconcernedly, some raved, some prayed . . . .

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God, why did such hideous thoughts intrude themselves now? He would never stand in their shoes, no breath of suspicion would ever approach him; he had laid his plans too well, had fortified himself against any contingency which might arise. The scene had been perfectly staged with not a detail missing to break the continuity of the version of what had occurred which must impress itself upon those who would view it.

Crossing the room, he seated himself on the side of the bed and lighted a cigarette. He could keep the light going a little longer without occasioning remark should one of the maids wake up, for he had often read until past one. He must not overdo it, though; he must not overdo anything. That would be the one great danger; he must hold himself impervious against self-betrayal.

He smoked cigarette after cigarette until a single stroke tinkled from the little clock, and, rousing himself from his reverie, Storm reached over and extinguished the lamp. The darkness seemed sinister, overwhelming, but as his eyes gradually accustomed themselves to it he saw pale, silvery moonbeams creeping in between the slats of the shutters, lying in shimmering bars across the floor and lightening the gloom with a faint, almost spiritual effulgence. The stillness of the night, too, was all at once broken by a myriad sounds which had not penetrated his consciousness before: strange creaks and groans in the walls as though something invisible were abroad, sibilant whispers in the chimney and the liquid, monotonous tap of water dripping from the faucet in the bathroom. Outside, the wind blew gustily, and somewhere about the house a loose shutter banged with a dismal, hollow sound.

What a hideous thing night was! There was something about it which loosened a fellow's thoughts, freed them from

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his stern control and let them wander where they would, unrestrained. Only one other such vigil had Storm kept: that of the crisis in Leila's desperate illness after their marriage. Every hour of it was branded on his brain, every detail arose again to attack his senses: the pungent, penetrating odor of carbolic, that strange, high voice which babbled and was still, the white-clad nurse, gravely non-commital, shutting the door behind which he might not pass, the taste of his own blood as he caught his lip between his teeth to keep back the groan of utter despair.

The night then had seemed interminable, but in the end had come the glorious promise that she would live! Now the dawn would bring only tidings of death, but he would not call her back again if he could; would not undo what he had done even if it lay in his power. His Leila had never existed; the pedestal was empty, that was all!

Gad, if only he could smoke! His nerves shrieked for the solace of nicotine, but he dared not light another cigarette. The smoke curling up from his opened window to that of one of the maids upstairs would tell her, should she also be awake, that her master was keeping vigil there in the darkness alone. She would think nothing of it now, perhaps, but later when the discovery was made she might wonder. He must manage, somehow, to get through the night without even the slight comfort that he craved!

With a whirring of soft wings, some tiny creature of the night came and beat upon the shutter, and Storm started violently. The bars of moonlight had traveled a barely perceptible inch or two across the floor, and from the distance there came the crowning note of desolation: the long-drawn, mournful howling of a dog.

Storm shivered. An old superstition which his Irish nurse had instilled into his mind in the nursery days swept

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over him. A dog's howl was the sign of death! *How could the beast know?* In all that sleeping countryside, there was one who shared his vigil, one who raised his voice in warning and lament!

Storm rose and, tiptoeing to the window, opened the shutters wide and fastened them noiselessly back against the house wall while he strained his eyes in the direction from which the dismal baying of the dog rose once more. Was it nearer now? Could it be that the beast, led by some instinct more subtle and unerring than man could fathom, had picked up the scent—the scent of the drifting ashes? Bridget had told him that a dog could sense the presence of death though it were miles away and would come to cry the news of it. What if the creature were to appear suddenly there between the trees and leap across the lawn to crouch beneath the curtained window of the den downstairs and howl its dread message?

The next minute Storm's tense attitude relaxed. What a fool he was to be stirred by the idle superstition of an old-wives' tale! His nerves must be going back on him, what with that accursed howling and the shifting shadows of the moonlight which were worse than utter darkness could be. Would it never end?

As if in answer the mellow chime of the clock sounded upon his ears. It must be three o'clock at least, possibly four——! He waited breathlessly. A second note pealed forth softly to die away in a vibrating echo, and then silence. Only two o'clock! Nearly five hours more! God, could he endure it and keep his sanity? Doyle's gruesome story of Lady Sannox came to his mind. Would he be found in the morning as the great physician had been after the night of horror, a gibbering idiot trying to thrust both feet into one leg of his trousers and babbling meaninglessly? Lady San-

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nox had been unfaithful, too, but it was the lover, not the husband, who paid!

He forced the hideous picture from his thoughts and turned for one final glance at the garden below. How still everything was! The howling of the dog had ceased, and the wind had died down to a mere rustling, whispering breeze. The moonlight, too, was paling, and beneath its waning radiance the garden still slumbered undisturbed as it had when he cast the ashes forth upon the air. From these ashes would spring the phoenix, not of love, but of murder; of hatred, vengeance and the lust to kill! What had he not loosed upon the world!

He covered his eyes as if to shut out the scene of false peace, of menacing, brooding calm before the crimson dawn; and staggering back to the bed, he sank down upon it once more. The touch of the smooth, cool linen beneath his fevered hand steadied him and brought a moment of tranquility to his reeling senses, but he could not stretch himself out upon it. The space beside him where Leila had so often lain was blank and empty, yet oddly her presence seemed near. He could almost hear her light tap upon the connecting door, almost see it open and her slender, white-clad form appear with the two heavy ropes of golden hair falling over her shoulders. She would come to him swiftly, tenderly, and he would take her in his arms and hold her close . . . .

But no tapping came upon the door, no form appeared, his arms were empty! Great God, why could he not forget!

The clock struck three, the moonlight faded and vanished, swallowed up in the darkest hour which comes before the dawn, and still Storm crouched there at the bed's foot sunk in a reverie of retrospection.

In just such another springtime as this they had gone upon their honeymoon. The awe and ecstasy of those

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days like a half-forgotten fragrance stole again over his spirit and thrilled him anew. How wonderful she had been, how wondrously sweet her shy confidences, her little outbursts of tenderness, her bewitching, bewildering changes of mood! How he reveled in each new phase of her nature as it revealed itself to him; how he had worshipped her, gloried in the possession of her! In the golden years that followed, the first ecstasy had not faded; it had but stabilized, deepened into a steady glow of unquestioning devotion, and the honeymoon had never really ended until this hour!

Impotently he struck his forehead with his clenched fist. Why must he go on thinking, thinking! The past was dead, buried beyond hope of resurrection! Why must it come trooping back to rob him of his strength and lull him to forgetfulness of the immediate future and the crisis which impended? The night had been years long! Would it never come to an end? Would this hideous darkness envelop him forever?

Four o'clock! Thank God, he had missed an hour! Only two more now, or three at the most, and then the cry of alarm would come winging up from below and the curtain would rise!

A chill dampness as of the grave itself stole in at the window, and Storm shivered although he was bathed in sweat. His pulse slowed and weakness descended upon him, while a swift, unnerving fear laid its clammy hands upon his throat.

He fought it off desperately. This was the dreaded hour before the dawn, the hour of lowered vitality when life's guard is down and death stalks in upon those awaiting it, those whose time has come and who slip out into the unknown quietly, peacefully. But for those who are hurled

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into it suddenly, hideously, by shot or stab or crashing blow——!

He dropped his wretched head upon his hands. This was madness! He must not succumb to it, he must marshal his resources, steady his brain, gather strength for the coming of day!

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the darkness was changing from black to gray. The eastern sky was unbroken, but a mist which could rather be felt than seen was rising from the darker shadows, and the wind had been succeeded by a dead calm. A hushed expectancy seemed to brood over the world, and Storm waited, too, dreading yet longing for the end of this prolonged suspense.

The clock ticked with maddening precision, and he tried to count the minutes, to keep his traitorous thoughts from wandering into dangerous, forbidden channels. His weakness had fallen from him, his pulse quickened and a mounting excitement drove from him all thought of fear. He would be ready when the time came to meet the issue. But would the time ever come?

There were faint gray streaks in the sky now, the shadows had sharpened and suddenly, piercingly, a cock crew. Storm welcomed the strident sound with uplifted head and squared shoulders. The dawn was coming at last!

He turned, crossed his arms on the foot of the bed and, resting his chin upon them, stared out through the open window at the lightening sky.

Five liquid, mellow notes sounded from the mantel, and he smiled grimly. One hour more and he could begin to listen for the maid's step upon the stair! His nerves were tingling in anticipation, and without urging his thoughts leaped ahead. He must be ready when the cry came, but not too obviously prepared. Surprise must come before

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alarm, consternation before a show of grief. The maid her- she must lead him to her discovery. His face and manner must reveal no slightest inkling of his knowledge of the truth.

Both of the servants were undeniably stupid. He had anathematized them many a time for their crass density and ignorance, but now he blessed it. They would suspect nothing, would seize upon any explanation of the tragedy which was subtly planted in their shallow brains and make it their own.

Of the outsiders, Carr must be called in first. He was a country practitioner of the old-fashioned sort who had been established there when Greenlea was known as Whigham's Corners, and croup and gout with their intermediate ills had been the range of his experience. He, too, could be counted upon to see only what was placed before him, and the details of the aftermath could safely be left in his hands.

A score of vague, anticipatory visions passed through Storm's brain. How shocked the crowd out here would be; and old George! He was probably fast asleep now, filling the air with contented snores. What would he say and do when the early edition of the evening papers brought the tidings to him? Storm thanked heaven that neither he nor Leila had relatives to come flocking with tears and questions and advice. He would be free at least from prying eyes beneath his own roof after the official medical inquiry had been concluded.

Gray turned to rose in the eastern sky, the mist lifted, and the world showed delicately green beneath it. The lone cock's crowing had been augmented by a chorus, and the birds stirred and twittered in the trees. All life was waking to greet the new day, but Leila . . . .

What time was it? Storm rose weakly and tottered to

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the mantel. The clock's face was plainly visible in the half-light, and he drew his breath sharply. Five minutes to six!

The pink glow deepened to crimson, and the sun in a blaze of glory peeped over the low-lying hills, but Storm did not see the spectacle for which he had waited through interminable tortured hours. He had caught a glimpse of his reflection in the mirror and stood gazing in incredulous dismay at the face which gazed back at him. Could it be his own with that sickly, bluish pallor, unshaven jaw, and haunted, sunken eyes which stared from dark-rimmed sockets?

Great heavens, if he appeared like that before even the servants his guilt would be patent to all the world!—But would it? The maids would surely be too agitated to note him in the shock of the discovery; and later, when the doctor came, horror and natural grief would account for the change in his appearance. His night of vigil had provided him with that which would perhaps be an asset rather than a danger.

What was that? He whirled about and stood listening. The floors and ceilings were thick, and no ordinary sound could penetrate from above; but had he not heard a step upon the stair? He waited in an intensity of strained attention, for several moments. The silence within the house remained unbroken.

With a sigh he glanced back at the clock. It must have struck the hour while he stood glaring at the apparition the mirror had revealed, for now the hands pointed to a quarter after six. Could it be that perverse fate would ordain that the maids should over-sleep this day of all days and prolong his agony?

Then his glance fell upon the bed. Its pillows were smooth and untouched, its covers creased but not tumbled about. The veriest child could see that it had not been

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slept in, the most casual glance would reveal the secret of his night-long vigil!

In three strides he had reached it and thrown back the covers, pommeling the pillows and crumpling the sheets. What a narrow escape! He paused, breathless, when his task was completed and gazed fearfully about him for other overlooked evidence.

His light had been burning until one o'clock. Hastily he picked up a book at random from those on the table and opening it laid it face downward upon the bed-stand. The stubs and ashes of the cigarettes he had smoked would occasion no remark; and the most painstakingly minute scrutiny failed to reveal any other incongruity in the room.

While he paused anew a sound came to his ears about which there could be no doubt; cautious but naturally heavy footsteps were descending the stairs from above. His heart leaped, and the blood raced in his veins, but he stood motionless as the steps passed his door and descended again.

It would come now, the cry for which he had waited! He held his breath until his ear-drums seemed bursting, and the minutes lengthened, but still the summons did not come. What could the girl be doing? Would she set all the other rooms to rights before approaching the den, or did she mean to shirk it altogether? Surely that streak of artificial light burning in the daytime must catch her eye as she passed along the hall! Was she gossiping with the milkman, idling on the porch? The suspense was unbearable!

He had borne with it through the long watches of the night, but now he could contain himself no longer. Every nerve was strained to the breaking point, and his nails bit into the flesh of his clenched hands. Was this agony to be stretched out interminably?

And then it came at last! A piercing, prolonged scream

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rang suddenly through the quiet house, to break and rise again, echoing back from the very walls.

Storm dropped his head in his hands, and an answering cry of unconscious blasphemy trembled on his lips.

"Thank God!"

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CHAPTER V

WHEN MORNING DAWNED

WHILE Storm hesitated, relaxed in that moment of utter abandon to relief, it came again; a wild shriek mounting from below in a high feminine voice and dying away in a quivering wail!

The long awaited discovery had come; now he must play his part. One false move!——But he put that resolutely from his thoughts as he flung his dressing gown about him and started for the door.

"What is it? What has happened?" He was leaning over the stair-rail now, and his voice, although subdued, held just the proper note of sharp inquiry. Even as he spoke he heard a heavy foot along the hall above and was conscious of the cook's head peering down affrightedly.

"Oh, Mr. Storm, sir! Mr. Storm!"

Agnes, the housemaid, sped along the lower hall and collapsed at the foot of the stairs.

"Well, what is it?" Storm demanded peremptorily, but still in that subdued tone. "Burglars here in the night? Don't you know better than to scream like that? You'll frighten Mrs. Storm——"

He paused, and the girl's shocked wail arose once more.

"Mrs. Storm! She's down here, sir, in the den. Oh, come quick!"

"Down——!"

The word died in Storm's throat, and still conscious of

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the cook's eyes he turned, dashed open the door of his wife's empty room, uttered a loud ejaculation and then plunged down the stairs.

"I thought she was asleep in her room!" he exclaimed. "Where——?"

"In the den, sir!" Agnes scrambled to her feet and stood clinging to the newel post as Storm passed her and rushed down the hall. "Oh, may God have mercy——!"

He heard a startled cry from above and lumbering feet hastily descended the stairs as he burst into the den and then stopped short. Leila's body was lying face upward now upon the rug, her waxen features clamped in the rigidity of marble, a hideous brown clot enmeshing the soft gold of her hair and smeared across her forehead.

The cry of horror which burst from Storm's lips was not all simulation, for anticipated as it was, the sight brought a sickening qualm to him. He had conquered it the next moment, however, and crossing to the body knelt and forced himself to touch it, to raise it until it rested against his knee just as he had done the moment the blow was struck. It was cold and stiff, the neck rigid, the eyes half open and unwinking in their stare.

As the trembling servants appeared in the doorway he laid the body gently back upon the rug and, rising, dashed his hand across his eyes. He remembered that gesture; he had often seen a favorite tragedian use it upon the stage.

"She is dead!" Horror, grief unutterable rang in his tones, and the maids began to sob hysterically.

Without seeming to note their presence Storm staggered past them to the telephone in the library.

"Greenlea 42 . . . . Dr. Carr, please . . . . Doctor, this is Storm, Norman Storm. For God's sake get over here as quickly as you can! . . . . No, I can't go into details,

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but it's a matter of life and death! . . . . All right, hurry, man!"

For a moment he sat there hunched over the silent instrument while the sweat poured in rivulets down his face. So far, so good. His shaking nerves were aiding him in the rôle he was playing, but he must not let them get the upper hand.

The early morning sun streamed in at the long French windows which opened on the veranda, and the twitter and chirp of birds came to him from the lawn outside, mingling with the muffled wail from the rear. He must go back. God! If only it were all over!

Agnes had collapsed again in a little heap in the den doorway, but Ellen, the cook, knelt by the body, crooning pitifully over it as Storm reentered. She made a grotesque figure clad only in the blanket which she had thrown over her voluminous nightgown, her iron-gray hair screwed back in a tight knob and tears streaming down her round, honest face.

"Oh, sir!" She looked up, her eyes tragic with horror. "Who in the world did it, sir?"

Storm started. A suspicion of murder already, and from the source which he had least anticipated! If stupid, unimaginative Ellen had leaped to such a conclusion could he hope after all that the truth would not reveal itself to Dr. Carr and the authorities? He moistened his lips with his tongue and stammered:

"She—she must have fallen—one of those fainting spells. It looks as though she had struck her head on the fender, there." He added quickly, "When I came home late I supposed Mrs. Storm was asleep in her room and did not disturb her. How did she come to be here?"

"Must have been waiting up for you, sir." Agnes lifted

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her head from her hands. "The mistress didn't expect you home for dinner, and I served her on the little table out on the veranda. She was sitting out there still when Ellen and me went to bed, along about nine. I asked her should I wait to lock up or see if you wanted a bit of cold supper, sir, but she said no, that she would attend to it herself. If only I'd known one of those attacks was coming on I wouldn't have left her for a minute! I'll never forgive myself! But the mistress seemed all right, as ever she was in her life, and I was that tired——"

Storm eyed her steadily:

"You would have heard Mrs. Storm had she called for help?"

"I don't know, sir." The girl twisted her hands. "I'm a pretty heavy sleeper, and I never heard a thing during the night. I'll never forget the turn it gave me when I came down this morning and found the light still on and her lying there on the floor——"

"God rest her soul!" Ellen ejaculated piously. "Sure we wouldn't have heard, away up there on the top floor at the back, unless she'd screamed fit to wake the dead. I'd had a full day's ironing, and I was asleep the minute my head touched the pillow. The first I knew was when Agnes here let that yell out of her awhile back. The best lady ever I worked for and the kindest! She must have been took sudden to fall over like that!"

Storm drew a breath of relief. It was evident that they were telling the truth and that neither of them was aware of Brewster's visit on the previous night, nor had an inkling of its aftermath. He sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands, the better to think. He must get rid of them some way; their chatter and lamentations were driving him mad!

"'Tis God's will, sir," Ellen ventured, in a hesitating

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effort at consolation, though the tears still coursed unchecked down her cheeks. "Couldn't we move her, sir? 'Tis terrible to leave her lying here, poor lady——"

"Not until the doctor comes." Storm's tones were hoarse and muffled. "Please go away, both of you. I want to be alone. Mind you say not a word of what has happened to the milkman or anyone else who may come to the door until the doctor has taken charge. We should have all the neighbors about our ears."

"We won't breathe a word." Agnes scrambled to her feet. "You'll ring, sir, if you want anything? A cup of coffee, now——?"

"Nothing!" Storm waved aside the suggestion with a shudder of disgust. "I only wish to be alone."

When the maids had withdrawn and their sobs were cut off by the closing of the pantry door, Storm's hands dropped to his knees. They had accepted his suggestion of the cause of death without question, but would it be safe for him to volunteer that theory as a foregone conclusion to the keener mind of the doctor? He knew the strength of first impressions; were the circumstantial proofs of accidental death obvious enough to preclude all suspicion of foul play? The evidence which had seemed so impregnable to him when he first conceived it crumbled before the wave of torturing doubt that assailed him. He did not find it as easy as he had planned to put behind him forever his secret knowledge of the truth. What would his thought processes have been had he indeed believed his wife to be sleeping safe in her room and come down to find her lying dead here?

The whirr of a light-running motor outside galvanized Storm into action, and he sprang up from his chair and hurried down the hall, flinging the front door wide just as

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the doctor mounted the veranda steps. A fine, grizzled stubble adorned the latter's usually clean-shaven jaw, and his light ulster was buttoned close up about his neck as though to conceal deficiencies in his hastily donned attire.

"What is it, old man?" he began genially, and then at sight of the other's face he paused abruptly.

"Come."

Without another word Storm turned and led the way to the den, and the physician followed in silence. At the door the former, with a gesture, stepped aside, and Dr. Carr's glance fell upon the body.

Stifling an exclamation he advanced and made a brief, deft examination. Then, shaken from his professional calm, he rose.

"There—is nothing I can do," he announced jerkily. "She has been dead for several hours—seven or eight, at least. Good God, Storm, what does this mean?"

The gaze of the physician was filled with blank amazement and horror, but to the other man it seemed sternly accusing, and he stammered brokenly:

"I don't know! She must have been here all night like this, while I thought her safe in bed and asleep! It is horrible! Horrible!"

He hid his face in his hands to shut out those keen eyes bent upon him, and Dr.Carr advanced and forced him gently down into a chair.

"Here, man, don't give way now! Pull yourself together! Do you mean that you only just discovered——?"

"A minute before I telephoned to you. It was the housemaid who found Leila like this when she came down to dust around, and her screams awakened me." Storm paused. A detailed explanation would look too much like an attempt at an alibi; he must wait for the other to drag the facts

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from him. "Oh, why didn't I speak, why didn't I look in her room when I came home last night! But I was afraid of disturbing her——"

He paused, and Dr. Carr asked quickly:

"You returned late and thought she had retired?"

"Yes. It was after eleven—I took the ten o'clock train from town—and when I got here the house was all dark and silent, and Leila's bedroom and dressing-room doors were closed." Storm's hands dropped to the arms of his chair, and he stared straight ahead of him as he added deliberately: "I went to bed as quietly as I could so as not to waken her, for she hadn't been well; she was threatened with one of these fainting attacks the night before last. I should never have left her! But you know how it has been, Doctor; you never could tell when they were coming on, and she had never done any real harm to herself before——"

"'Fainting attacks?'" the doctor repeated sharply. He wheeled and approached the body once more and Storm watched him with bated breath. "The right temple bone has been crushed in, as if with some heavy, blunt instrument!"

"That knob on the corner of the fender——" Storm felt his way carefully. "It—it's all covered with blood! She must have fallen——"

The doctor glanced at it and then turned swiftly to him.

"Look here, Storm, have you questioned the servants? What do they know of this?"

"Nothing. I've been too nearly crazed to question them coherently, but from what I gathered they went to bed early and left her sitting out on the veranda, and the housemaid said something about Leila having told her that she would wait up for me. Think of it, Doctor! She must have come in here——"

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"Hold on a minute. Was the body lying just like this, face upturned, when you saw it first?"

Storm nodded.

"Yes. I rushed to her and started to lift her up, but when I saw that—that she was dead——"

He bowed his head on his breast as if unable to continue, but he saw the physician measure with a swift eye the distance from the chair to the body, and then stoop to examine the fender again. Storm's knuckles whitened as he gripped the chair-arms in an agony of suspense. Would his implied suggestion bear fruit? Had he too palpably ignored the other's intimation that a blow had been struck? Would it have been more natural for him to have presupposed violence, murder, as the physician obviously had done? It was too late now for him to question the wisdom of his course; he could brace himself for the next step in the ghastly farce.

"Has anyone touched the body?" Dr. Carr spoke with professional brusqueness.

"Yes; when I came back here after telephoning to you both the servants were in the room, and Ellen was bending over my poor wife—I can't speak of it, Doctor; I can't realize it! I feel as if I should go mad! Leila——"

"I know, old man, but we've got to get at the bottom of this thing. Try to collect yourself and think back. You said you were awakened by the housemaid's screams when she discovered the body. Do you know if she touched it before you got down here?"

Storm shook his head.

"I never asked." He kept his eyes lowered carefully to hide a glint of triumph. When Carr discovered that Agnes had found the body lying face down, the case he had manufactured would be complete. "I wish you—you'd talk to them, Doctor. I—I can't, just now. I'm all in!"

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"I will. Don't think about them." Dr. Carr glanced at the low light on the desk which still glowed brazenly in the gloom of the curtained room. "Who turned on that light instead of drawing aside the curtains?"

"It must have been on all night. Agnes said that was the first thing she noticed when she got to the door here; that the light was still going. Then she saw the body——" he halted again and added in studied ingenuousness: "I might have observed it when I came home last night, I suppose, but it is scarcely perceptible from the front hall, and finding it all dark there except for the lamp on the newel post which Leila always leaves lighted for me, I went straight upstairs. It never occurred to me that she would be waiting up for me, and in here, although she has done so occasionally. I was pretty tired. My God, Doctor, if I had seen the light and come in here, I might have been able to save her! There might have been something I could do—!"

"No, Storm, no one could have done anything for her. Death was instantaneous. You heard nothing after you went upstairs? No sound of a fall, or disturbance of any kind?"

"Nothing." Storm started from his chair. "It couldn't have happened after I retired! Surely, if Leila had been alive when I entered the house she would have heard me! The servants sleep like logs, but I waken at the slightest sound. I would have known——!"

"That's so. Of course, you would, old man." Dr. Carr's tone was soothingly compassionate. "You'd better go upstairs now and put on some clothes; you haven't even slippers on your feet. I'll have a word with the servants while you're gone——"

"But Leila!" Storm forced his shrinking eyes to turn yearningly toward the still form. "I can't bear to leave her

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lying like that! Ellen wanted to lift her to the couch, but I thought we'd better wait until you came——"

"Why?" The doctor shot the question at him, and Storm, realizing his slip, swiftly countered:

"I didn't know what to think! I tell you, Doctor, when I first came in and saw her it looked almost like murder! My brain isn't clear yet from the shock of it, although when I saw the blood on the fender, of course, I knew she must have fallen, and then I remembered her condition—those fainting spells, and all that. There isn't a soul in the world who would harm a hair of Leila's head!" He threw up his hands with an impotent gesture. "I felt dazed, helpless! I had to depend on you, and I wanted you to see everything just as it was."

"You can rely on me, old man!" The doctor patted his arm and led him to the door. "We must not move her yet, however. Under the circumstances we'll have to notify the authorities, merely as a matter of form, and they may want to investigate for themselves. I'll call them up and then come and give you something to steady your nerves. You're bearing up splendidly, but we can't have you going to pieces until the formalities have been concluded. Is there anyone you would like me to send for; any member of the family, or friend?"

"Yes!" Storm exclaimed in a sudden flash of inspiration. "Get old George for me, will you, Doctor? George Holworthy, you know; 0328 Stuyvesant. Tell him to come out here on the first train, that I need him. Don't—don't go into details, but make him understand that it's serious, desperate! I'm not a weakling, I won't break down, but I'd feel stronger if George were here. We've been friends for years."

"I know; I'll get him." Dr. Carr drew out his handker-

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chief and mopped his forehead. "Get into some clothes now. I'll be right with you."

"I wculd rather stay here with Leila, alone with her——" Storm murmured mendaciously. "I won't touch her, Doctor; let me stay!"

"No." The physician transferred the key to the outside of the door and locked it decisively as he spoke. "It wouldn't do you any good, Storm. You've got to brace up. You have put this affair in my hands now, and I order you to pull yourself together. Get upstairs and take a cold shower and then I'll give you a sedative."

With a last glance at the closed door, Storm stumbled to the stairs and mounted, lurching against the banisters as though overcome by weakness; but in reality his brain was seething with the thought of the danger yet ahead.

He closed the door of his room softly behind him, and then paused. What if Carr's sympathetic, friendly manner had been assumed to cloak a suspicion of the truth? The physician had seemed to acccpt his theory, but he had not committed himself. Suppose he were following, tiptoeing up the stairs now to peer in at the keyhole——!

The thought was madness, yet Storm turned instinctively. The key of his door had been mislaid long ago and never replaced, but a heavy lounging robe hung from a peg on the center panel. Catching a fold of it he drew it back over the door-knob so that it trailed before the lock like a curtain, thick and impenetrable. His bathroom had no entrance leading to the hall, and the only other door—that opening on Leila's dressing-room was protected by a cretonne portière.

He realized that he had no need for secrecy, there was nothing to be done now which all the world might not safely see—and yet an insane desire came to him to conceal himself from all eyes. He must have a moment of respite from

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the rôle he was playing, a moment of peace and calmness to gird himself anew for what the immediate future might hold.

Did Carr accept the situation at its face value? The man whom in the night he had half-scornfully dismissed from his mind as a simple country practitioner now appeared in a vastly different light. For the moment he held in his hands Storm's immunity from suspicion, and the latter's disquietude increased.

There was his step upon the stair! What would his face reveal?

With a quick revulsion of feeling, Storm sprang to the door and opened it.

The smile with which the benign physician greeted him removed all lingering doubt.

"Not taken your shower? Come, Storm, this won't do! I've 'phoned, and the coroner's assistant is on his way over from the county seat." He held out a small glass, and the other took it mechanically. "Drink this and pull yourself together, for there are some trying hours ahead."

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CHAPTER VI

THE VERDICT

"YOU were right, unquestionably, Storm," Dr. Carr announced twenty minutes later as the other joined him in the library. "I don't mind admitting that my thoughts—my sensations, rather—when first I saw the body were identical with what yours had been, but there's only one possible conclusion. Mrs. Storm must have been seated in that big chair by the hearth when she felt suddenly faint; and in trying to rise, she must have fallen forward, striking her forehead with crushing force against that solid brass knob on the fender. Agnes tells me that she found her mistress lying face downward against it, and thinking she had merely fainted, turned the body over. It was only when she saw the wound that she screamed. Of one thing you may be sure; Mrs. Storm didn't suffer. She never knew what struck her. Death came instantly."

Storm sank into a chair, his twitching face turned from the light. If Carr only knew!

"I must try to think that!" he murmured. "Did you get George Holworthy on the 'phone, Doctor?"

"Yes. He is on his way out here by now. Agnes gave me some coffee, and I told her to bring a tray for you.—No protests!" as Storm made a gesture of repugnance. "You are under my orders, remember, and you've got to keep going."

Storm drank the coffee obediently enough when it came,

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conscious of a craving for its stimulus. The first and most hazardous milestone was passed; Dr. Carr had fallen for his game, had been completely hoodwinked by the circumstantial evidence he had arranged. He had won an unconscious yet powerful ally, and the way seemed clear before him, but the glow of elation was past.

While the physician droned on in a soothing monotone, seeking for words of consolation to assuage the grief of his patient and neighbor, the humming of a high-powered car reached their ears as it turned in at the gate and ploughed up the driveway, and Storm sank back.

"That is the coroner's man now." Dr. Carr strode to the window. "Oh, he has sent young Daly, and the chief medical examiner is with him. That will simplify matters tremendously. I know them both, and I'll see that they don't bother you any more than is absolutely necessary."

Agnes ushered in a tall, lanky young man and his stouter, elderly companion who nodded in brisk, professional gravity.

"This is Mr. Daly and Dr. Bellowes, Mr. Storm." Carr presented them smoothly. "Sorry to have brought you so far on a mere matter of form, gentlemen. I am prepared to issue a certificate of accidental death, but I should like to have you examine the body. This way, please; nothing has been touched."

Storm rose as the physician turned to lead the others to the den, but the young man called Daly waved him back.

"Your presence won't be necessary, Mr. Storm." His tone was deferential, but there was a note of authority in it that brooked no opposition. "I will have to ask you a few questions later, but we won't trouble you now."

Storm bowed and waited until their footsteps diminished down the hall, and the door of the den closed definitely behind them. Then, with nervously clenching hands, he

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turned to the window. What a fool he was to harass himself with idle fears! Had not everything gone like clockwork, exactly as he had anticipated? He had been complete master of the situation so far, and he would be until the end. He must not, could not fail!

Old George would come soon, now. That had been a master stroke, that summoning of him! Besides being the natural, logical thing to have done under the circumstances, it provided a staunch, reliable buffer between himself and curious, sensation-seeking eyes. George's dense stupidity and blind affection would be in itself a safeguard, and he anticipated no difficulty in dissembling before him. What if George had suspected or even known of Leila's affair with Brewster? He would never dream that Storm himself had discovered it, much less that he had killed her.

What were the officials doing in there so long? Storm paced the floor restlessly. Surely the case was obvious enough; he couldn't have overlooked anything, after all! Why didn't they have done with it and get out of his house? He wanted time to think, a breathing space in which to prepare himself for the onslaught of neighbors and reporters when the truth came out.

As if timed to his thought, a familiar runabout which was passing halted at the gate just as it had on the previous day, and Millard, after gazing for a moment in blank amazement at the official car drawn up at the veranda steps, descended and came hurriedly up the path.

Storm saw him from the window and muttered in exasperation. To be annoyed now by that he-gossip was unthinkable! He'd soon send him about his business——!

He caught himself up suddenly. This was the moment for him to court sympathy, not brusquely repel it and awaken an antagonism which might beget dark rumor and

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suspicion. He hurried to the door, and when Millard puffed fussily up the steps of the veranda he found his host awaiting him with outstretched hands.

"Millard! It was good of you to stop. I hoped you would when I saw you passing."

"What's wrong, old chap? That's the Chief Medical Examiner's car, isn't it? I was afraid——" He broke off as the other raised his eyes. "Heavens, Storm, what is it?"

"My wife!" Storm bowed his head, and added brokenly: "She's dead, Millard! Died suddenly, sometime during the night."

"Mrs. Storm!" Millard fell back a step, his apoplectic face paling. "What——? How? God, this is frightful! What caused it?"

"Dr. Carr says it was one of her fainting spells. She must have fallen and struck her head. I—we only found her this morning."

"Terrible! I—I don't know what to say, old chap!" Millard stammered. His small, beady eyes strayed eagerly past his host into the darkened hallway, and he advanced, but Storm's figure barred the entrance. "I'm simply aghast! Poor, dear little woman! I can't believe it! You have all my sympathy, dear fellow, but words can't seem to express it just now. How—how did it happen——?"

"We don't know yet." Storm gripped the agitated little man's arm for a moment as if for support. "I can't talk of it! Carr will tell you all about it later, but I don't think he wants the news to get about until the formalities have been concluded with the coroner's men. I can depend on you——?"

"You know that, old chap!" Millard interrupted him warmly. "I say, isn't there anything that I can do? The

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car's right here, you know, and I'm glad to be of service——"

"Why, yes." Storm eyed him gratefully. "I've sent for George Holworthy, but he hasn't been told what has happened. He ought to be here on the next train, and it is due any minute. Would you mind running down to the station and bringing him back here, and—and break the news to him for me?"

"Certainly, dear fellow!" Millard clapped his hand to the other's shoulder. "I'll go at once, Storm. There doesn't seem to be anything a chap can say at a time like this, but I'm right here if you want me! Remember that, and try to —to bear it, some way. I'll be back in no time!"

He bustled off down the veranda steps and toward his waiting car, and Storm closed the door with a grim smile. He was well aware that Millard—who was known facetiously about the Country Club as the "town crier"—would spread the news of the tragic "accident" far and wide, and he had carefully planted in the other's mind the impression that Dr. Carr was responsible for the theory of accident. He had always maintained a certain reserve with Millard, and realized that his confidence now had immeasurably flattered the little man, cementing a friendship which would prove valuable if by any chance ugly whispers arose.

Then, too, he had avoided the task of breaking the news to old George. Difficult as it had been to play his rôle before the tearful servants, the cautious physician and the county officials, he shrank far more from the ordeal of facing his friend with the story he had fabricated. It would be easy, of course; almost too easy. It was a battle of wits, a fair fight with others, but with slow-witted, loyal old George . . . . He had turned back to the library when a voice speaking his name aroused him swiftly from his reverie.

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"Mr. Storm, I'd like to see you for a moment." It was Daly. "Don't be alarmed, please. Dr. Bellowes is quite satisfied that Mrs. Storm's death was accidental, but the circumstances are so unusual that as a mere matter of form I want a statement from you to file in my report. Will you tell me, please, what occurred from the time of your arrival home last evening until you summoned Dr. Carr at seven o'clock this morning?"

Haltingly, as if still dazed with the shock, but with every nerve tinglingly on guard, Storm repeated his story exactly as he had told it to Dr. Carr, and Daly listened attentively, punctuating it with quick nods of satisfaction, as though he were mentally checking off each detail.

At its conclusion he made no comment, but instead asked a question which brought a start of renewed apprehension to the other man.

"Do you know, Mr. Storm, if your wife had any enemies? Is there anyone who will profit by her death or who had any reason for wishing her out of the way?"

"Good heavens, no!" Storm could feel the blood ebbing from his face, and his voice had grown suddenly husky. "You don't mean——?"

"I don't mean anything," Mr. Daly retorted calmly. "I told you this was a mere matter of form, Mr. Storm. Do you know of any enmity which your wife might have incurred?"

"None. Everyone who knew her loved her; she hadn't an enemy in the world," Storm stammered. "No one could profit by her death, and as to—to wishing her out of the way——"

"That is all right, sir. I don't want to distress you, but these facts must be clearly established." Mr. Daly paused.

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"How long have you been married, and what was Mrs. Storm's maiden name?"

"Leila Talmage. We were married ten years ago." Storm controlled his wildly leaping pulses and forced himself to reply calmly, weariedly, as though the subject caused him infinite pain. "She was an orphan, the ward of a friend of our family, and has no living relatives of whom I ever heard."

"Did she have any money of her own?" the other pursued.

"Very little. Ten or twelve thousand, I believe." Storm moistened his lips and drew himself up slightly. "My attorney, Wendle Foulkes, took charge of it for her at her request, but I have never made any inquiries concerning her expenditure of it. It was hers, to do with as she pleased."

"Then you don't know the value of her estate now?"

"No."

"Nor whether she left a will?"

"I do not, Mr. Daly. My attorney can answer all such questions far better than I." Storm drew his hand once more across his eyes. Why did the fellow stare so infernally at him? "I must refer you to him. He will have to be notified, of course; I hadn't thought of that. My mind—I cannot collect myself! It is horrible that there should be even a thought of foul play in connection with my poor wife; it is almost a profanation! Her life was an open book, she was the soul of honor and goodness and charity——"

His voice broke realistically, and his inquisitor rose.

"I don't doubt you, but you will understand that we have to take every possibility into consideration in a case of this sort. The Chief will want to see you when he's through in there, but won't detain you long."

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His searching gaze lowered at last, and he turned and left the room.

Storm listened to his retreating footsteps in a maze of conflicting emotion. Had that inquisition been merely the formality that the young official claimed, or had they stumbled on the truth? If Daly's efforts had been directed toward establishing a possible motive, Storm congratulated himself that he had more than held his ground. He had succeeded in placing on record a statement of absolute faith and trust in his wife, and surely his bearing as a grief-stricken husband had been seemingly sincere beyond question! If they suspected, though; if they unearthed that damnable affair of hers with Brewster, discovered that he had been in that house on the previous night and could prove that Storm himself returned before the other's departure . . . .

The impudent chug-chug of a runabout broke in upon his troubled thought, and he turned to the hall just as the housemaid appeared on the stairs.

"Agnes, I'm going to my room. Mr. Millard has just brought Mr. Holworthy up from the station, I think. Send Mr. Holworthy up to me, but tell Mr. Millard I'll call him on the 'phone later. I can't see him now."

"Yes, sir." Agnes sniffed and lowered her red-lidded eyes. "The other gentlemen——?"

"They're still here. Let me know, please, when they want me."

She stepped aside and he passed her, mounting to his room. It was in order, and with rare tact the girl had left the door leading to Leila's apartments closed; yet as plainly as though it were open Storm could see before him every intimate detail: the little silver articles on the dressing table, the quaint old four-poster bed which had been his mother's,

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the absurdly low chairs piled with cushions, Leila's favorite books scattered about——

A sudden dizziness seized him; the same sickening qualm which had assailed him that morning when he entered the den swept over him in an overwhelming flood. He had been keyed up since with the need of self-preservation, but now a swift reaction came, and he flung himself into a chair, his head buried in his arms outflung across the table. He had killed her, and she deserved it; she had been faithless! It was done and over with, and yet——!

Her presence seemed nearer him, the years of their love and life together rose before him, and something very like a dry, harsh sob burst from his throat.

"Norman! God, it isn't true! It can't be!"

The broken cry from the doorway fell like a dash of icy water on his rising emotion, and instantly on guard once more, Storm raised his head.

George Holworthy stood there, his homely face working grotesquely, tears starting unashamed from his faded blue eyes.

"I never dreamed—I was afraid when I got Carr's message that she was ill, but that a thing like this should have come——!"

"George!" Storm rose and their hands clasped. "I sent for you as soon as I could! I can't talk about it, I can't realize it! It is like some horrible nightmare! You won't leave me? You'll stay here and see me through?"

"I'm here, ain't I?" George gulped fiercely. "I suppose you've been badgered enough, and I won't add to it, but for God's sake tell me a little! Remember, I loved her, too!"

"I know you did, and she had a very real affection for you." Storm averted his head, for the sight of the other's genuine sorrow was unnerving.

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"All I could get out of Millard was that you found her dead this morning, and that Carr said it was her old trouble, that catalepsy—*petit mal,* they call it, don't they? I never thought it could prove fatal!"

"It didn't. But she fell, striking her head——!" Storm paused eloquently. "When you see her, George, you'll understand. It's too awful, I can't——"

"But where is she? What have they done with her?" George glanced toward the closed door, and Storm shook his head.

"In the den. Agnes found her there and screamed——"

But Agnes herself appeared in the doorway, cutting his sentence short.

"If you please, Mr. Storm, the gentlemen downstairs would like to speak to you."

"I'll be down." By a supreme effort he braced himself to meet the verdict. "You'll come too, George?"

George nodded and blew his nose resoundingly.

"I'm with you," he said simply, and together they descended the stairs.

Dr. Bellowes met them at the library door.

"We have concluded our examination," he announced. "As my colleague, Doctor Carr, had already surmised, Mrs. Storm's death was due to a fracture of the right temporal caused by a fall while suffering an attack of *petit mal.*"

Storm closed his eyes, and for an instant the earth seemed to rock beneath his feet.

It was over and he had won! He had fooled them all!

"I feared it, Doctor," he remarked quietly, and congratulated himself at the calmness of his tone. "I should not have left her alone last night after the warning we had of a possible attack the day before—but I must try not to think

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of that now. Can't I offer you something before you start on your ride back? A cup of coffee perhaps?"

Dr. Bellowes shook his head, but his eyes traveled to the humidor on the table, and Storm followed his glance.

"A cigar, then?" He opened the humidor and passed it around. "The matches are just in there——"

He lighted one, watching his hand curiously meanwhile. How steady it was! Not a tremor to reveal the excitement mounting within him. He had pulled off the greatest, grimmest scheme in the world, and yet not the flicker of an eyelash betrayed him!

Dr. Bellowes blew out a cloud of smoke.

"Yes, Mr. Storm," he resumed, "it was unquestionably an accident; a most unusual and unfortunate one. Unofficially, I should like to tender to you my most sincere sympathy."

"Thank you, Doctor."

Storm bowed and stood quite still as George showed them out.

If anyone had told him that such a plan could have been conceived and carried out successfully without a single hitch, he would have laughed him to scorn. He would not have believed anyone capable of such combined ingenuity and self-control, least of all himself!

The position of the body, the smear upon the brass knob of the fender, the blood-stained driver cleaned, the handkerchief and its ashes eliminated, the hair pin, the single golden hair, the light left burning—he mentally reviewed each clue in the case, recalled each step of the investigation, and realized that there had been no flaw.

It had been a supreme battle of wits, his against all the rest, and he had beaten them! He had won!

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CHAPTER VII

THE LETTER

DESPITE his sense of victory the day was a long-drawn-out period of torture for Storm.

Upon the departure of Dr. Carr and the officials, George Holworthy had to be told in detail the story of the night's tragic event, and its reiteration drew heavily upon the store of self-control which was left to his companion after the ordeal through which he had passed; but Storm narrated it carefully, with a critical consciousness of every effect.

"I don't know what is the matter with me!" he cried dramatically in conclusion. "I can't break down, I can't seem to feel, George! I saw her as she lay there, I tell myself that this ghastly, unbelievable thing is true, and yet it has no meaning for me! I catch myself listening for her step, waiting to hear her voice! Am I going mad?"

"It's the shock," George said quietly. "The stark horror of the thing has stunned you, Norman. You can't feel it yet, you are numb, I suppose."

He looked curiously shrunken and withered and years older as he sat hunched in his chair, his faded, red-rimmed eyes blinking fast. Storm felt a sense of impatience, almost of repugnance as he regarded him. His evident sorrow was a subtle reproach before which the other writhed. Could he endure his presence in the days which must decently elapse before the funeral? George would be useful, how-

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ever, in the interim, and when it was all over he could shut himself away from everyone.

"That's why I sent for you," he observed. "I can't seem to get a grip on things, and I thought you would take charge for me and keep off the mob of sympathizers——"

"I will. I'll attend to everything, old man. There's bound to be a certain amount of publicity, you know, but I'll see the reporters myself, and fend off the neighbors. Carr will send in the undertaker, and I'll 'phone Foulkes. Is there anyone else you want me to notify?"

George did indeed prove invaluable, for Millard had spread the tidings and soon the house was besieged by horror-stricken friends of the dead woman. They came from all walks of life, from the humblest country-folk about to the most arrogant of the aristocratic colony, in mute testimony to the breadth of her kindliness and the affection she had inspired. From earliest afternoon, too, reporters began filtering in on every train, but George held them off with surprising tact and diplomacy, and by nightfall a semblance of peace had fallen upon the bereft household.

The den was restored to its normal state, the door locked, and in the dainty drawing-room across the hall from the library Leila lay as if asleep, her golden hair falling low to hide the cruel wound and all about her the early spring flowers she had loved.

Now that they were alone together, George's presence proved insufferable, and Storm, professing complete nervous exhaustion, suggested that they retire early.

George, worn out with his own emotions and the strain of the day, acquiesced in evident relief. He had dreaded a night-long vigil with his bereaved friend and rejoiced that the strange, seemingly dazed apathy which had held him in its grip was giving way to the demands of over-taxed nature.

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Sleep, however, was furthest from Storm's intentions. There was work still to be done, and in secret. Foulkes had signified his intention of coming out on the first train in the morning, and it was possible that he might suggest going over Leila's papers. If that letter which she had tried to conceal the day before were found, or any other correspondence from Brewster, it might precipitate the rise of a suspicion which otherwise seemed now to be eliminated.

Leila's desk was down in the library, and waiting only until he felt assured that the occupant of the guest chamber across the hall had fallen asleep, Storm put on soft felt slippers, drew his dressing gown about him, and descended.

How still the house was! Still, yet vibrant with something unseen but palpitating as though the spirit had not wholly departed from that immobile form lying amid the blossoms, whose fragrance stole out with cloying, sinister sweetness upon the air.

Storm closed the library door noiselessly behind him, switched on the light and crossing to the little rose-wood desk stood transfixed.

A book lay upon it, and from between its leaves protruded, as if carelessly or hastily thrust there, what appeared to be the very letter he sought. "Leicester Building". The engraved letters stood out as he drew the envelope forth, but above them was a line which made him start.

"National Tool & Implement Company".

But Brewster was an insurance broker! The name had an oddly familiar ring, too. What could it mean?

With shaking fingers he drew the enclosure from the envelope and read:

Mrs. Norman Storm:
Dear Madam:-

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I have reconsidered my decision of this morning and am willing to sell to you the strip of land adjoining your property at the price you named, on condition that the deal be consummated with you personally. I will enter into no negotiations with your husband. If you will call at my office to-morrow, the ninth inst., with your check I will have the deed and bill of sale ready.

Your obedient servant,

ALPHEUS JAFFRAY

Storm crushed the letter in his hands. The trout stream! Leila had bearded their irascible neighbor in his town office and induced him to sell her the property which he himself had been unable to force or cajole the old scoundrel to relinquish! But why had she been so secretive about it? Why had she lied about her presence in town, sought to conceal the letter, striven to make a mystery where no cause for one existed?

The queries which hammered at his brain were swiftly swept aside by the one dominating fact. Her visit had not concerned Brewster, her lie had concealed no act of guilt or even indiscretion! What if—Great God! If he had made a hideous mistake——? But no! He had seen them together, she and her lover, in that very room not twenty-four hours before; had heard Brewster's impassioned words, witnessed his act of devotion! Whatever motive had prompted her secret purchase of the trout stream, it was beside the point at issue. There must be proof in her desk, proof to augment and support the evidence of his own eyes.

He tore the drawers open one after another, scattering the neat piles of correspondence, social notes, cards of invi-

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tation, receipted bills, memoranda and household accounts —his feverish fingers sought in vain among them for a single line of an intimate or sentimental nature. But then, Leila would scarcely have kept secret love letters in an open desk. Somewhere in her apartments upstairs, perhaps, she had arranged a hiding place for them.

Then a swift remembrance came to him. The secret compartment! Back of the small drawer between the pigeon-holes on the desk top was a small space to which access could be had only by pressing a hidden knob. Leila had found it by accident one day and had been almost childishly delighted with her discovery.

Storm removed the drawer, pressed the spring, and the false back slid aside revealing two packets of letters. One was bound by a bit of white satin ribbon, yellowing now and slightly frayed; the other encircled with a rubber band.

The sight of them brought a grimace of triumph to Storm's lips, but it changed quickly as he tore the ribbon from the first packet. The letters were all postmarked prior to ten years ago and were in his handwriting—his own love letters, written during the period of their engagement and before. One end of the ribbon was knotted about a dried flower; an orange blossom! It must have been from her wedding bouquet.

A strange tightness constricted his throat, and he thrust the packet hastily aside. He did not want to be reminded at this hour of the happiness, the fool's paradise in which he had lived before enlightenment came. No sentimentality about the past must be permitted to weaken his self-control now.

But the second packet, too, contained only his letters; those written since their marriage, mere notes of a most prosaic sort, some of them, sent to her during his infrequent

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absences from home and reminding her of trivial, every-day matters which required attention. The last, dated only a month before, concerned the reinstatement of MacWhirter, their ante-bellum gardener. Why had Leila kept every scrap of his handwriting as though she treasured it, as though it were precious to her?

For a long time he sat there staring at the scattered envelopes, the first vague, terrible stirring of doubt which had come when he read Jaffray's letter returning again to torture his spirit. Then once more the scene of the previous night in that room arose in reassuring condemnation, and with a smothered oath he seized the letters and tore them viciously, the older packet with the rest, until nothing remained but a heap of infinitesimal scraps and the bit of yellowed ribbon.

He wanted them out of his sight, destroyed utterly, but where——? The fire in the kitchen range would have been banked for the night, but he could rake the coals aside. Sweeping the torn letters into a newspaper together with the ribbon, he made his way quietly to the kitchen. The range balked him at first. He strove vainly to coax a blaze from the livid coals, but with the aid of kindling wood and after much manipulation of the dampers he succeeded in producing a tiny flame. Upon this he thrust handfuls of the paper scraps, and when they caught and blazed up he thrust the ribbon deep among them.

How slowly they burned! The edges of the ribbon charred and it curled up, writhing like a living thing in agony. The flame was dying down, and Storm had turned frantically to the wood-box to pile on more fuel, when suddenly there came a grayish puff, a leaping tongue of fire, and the ribbon vanished, leaving only a heap of pale flakes against the darker, coarser ashes.

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Storm scattered them and was placing an extra stick of wood upon the glowing coals to make sure that the evidences of his work would be wholly obliterated, when the utterance of his name in surprised accents made him wheel as though a blow had been dealt to him from behind.

"Norman! I thought you were in bed!" George, his short, obese figure, grotesque in an ugly striped bathrobe, stood blinking in the doorway. "What on earth are you doing down here? And what's burning? There's a funny odor——"

"Wretched green wood. No wonder the cook grumbles about this range; I thought I should never get it going!" Storm interrupted hastily. "I couldn't sleep, and wanted a cup of coffee. There was no use in disturbing the servants."

"Why didn't you call me?" demanded the other. "I could have made it for you. You look all done up, Norman. Did you take that sleeping stuff Carr left for you?"

Storm shook his head.

"It would take more than that to bring sleep to me tonight," he said.

"Well, anyway, I don't know what you are poking about in here for!" objected George. "You're a chump to try to get the range going at this hour when you've got that electric percolator in the dining-room. Here's the coffee; come on in there and I'll have it ready for you in no time!"

Storm followed him in silence, only too glad to get him away from the kitchen, and watched him as in deft bachelor fashion he manipulated the percolator.

Storm drank the coffee when it was made and then dragged George off to the library where the latter at length fell asleep upon the couch; but Storm sat huddled in his chair, dry-eyed and brooding, until the dawn.

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