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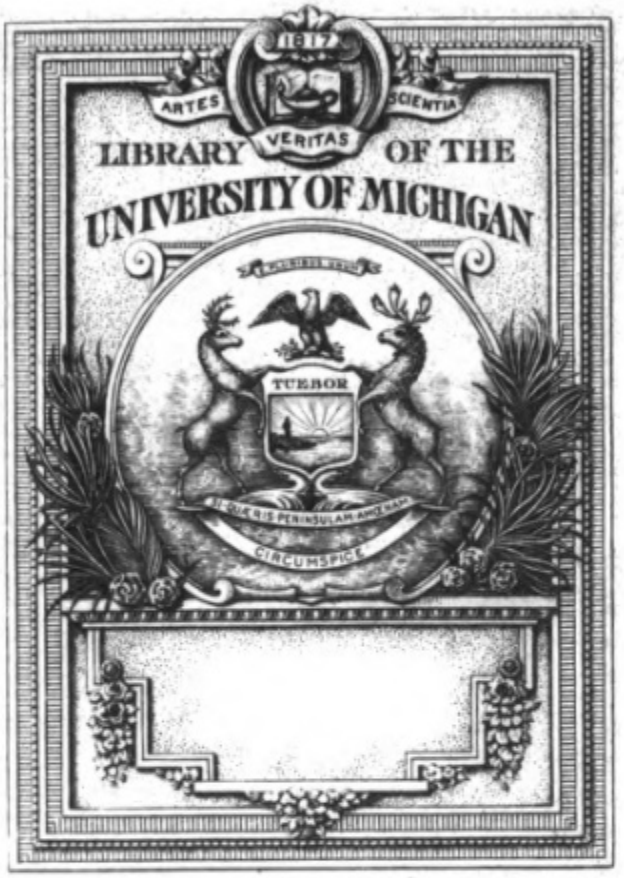

BEQUEST OF
ORMA FITCH BUTLER, PH.D., '07
PROFESSOR OF LATIN

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MURDER FROM BEYOND

AN unseen hand reaches out, a woman is found dead, apparently strangled; later, her reputed lover is mysteriously shot down. The last victim is a minister. What has destroyed them? Is it a diabolical new invention? The murder method resembles that of a dead killer. Is he at work again through supernatural forces? A fourth victim, a beautiful girl, is marked. A race of love against death follows— and love wins, bringing to a heart-warming conclusion a story of outstanding ingenuity, abounding in constant surprises—a thriller of top notch rank.

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R. FRANCIS FOSTER
AUTHOR OF THE MOAT HOUSE MYSTERY

MURDER FROM BEYOND

THE MACAULAY COMPANY
NEW YORK

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CHAPTER I

MURDER IN THE NIGHT

TOM MANNING looked appreciatively round his bedroom. It was good to be at Stanmead again after the hurly-burly of a year in Fleet Street. The Rectory was the same as ever, he reflected, as he took off his jacket and hung it in the big wardrobe; Uncle Hilary had not changed much. A shade more austere, perhaps, but still the kindly saint whom the villagers worshiped. One could see their affection in their eyes, their reverence in their bearing. But the Rector must be lonely. It was a pity he thought it necessary to remain single. Still, marriage might have affected him adversely.

Tom Manning went to the window and looked out into the moonlight. Beyond the grey pile of the church the lights of Redlands twinkled as the night wind swayed tree-branches before them. He must go over tomorrow and renew his acquaintance with the Whartons. True, Mrs. Wharton affected him disagreeably—she was "fast," he decided—but old Wharton was a good sort. And there was Margery. He supposed she was engaged by now. Rumor had it that there'd been an understanding between her and that fellow—what was his name? Tom Manning frowned in an effort of memory.

His thoughts went off at a tangent. He remembered

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the home-coming of the Whartons from India, where Terence Wharton had a tea-plantation, over a year ago. Wharton had inherited a small fortune and had bought Redlands on the outskirts of the village.

Tom Manning had been staying at the Rectory convalescing after pneumonia when the Whartons arrived; he had no other relative to go to, and he and the Rector had always been fond of each other. He remembered how Uncle Hilary had "come out of himself," as he put it. But Wharton wasn't the cause. It was Margery. The celibate had fallen in love for the first time. It was plain to anyone what had happened. The Rector was too simple to hide his feelings. Tom had watched the fight between love and what the priest considered his duty going on. Apparently duty had won. Tom was glad that it had. Youthfully he told himself that the man of forty was too old to mate with a girl of twenty. But Uncle Hilary didn't look forty—then; he did now. Repression had aged him, Tom thought. He looked awfully sad, too.

The church clock struck the half hour. Half-past ten. It was early to go to bed, but he was tired. Besides, he wanted to get up early in the morning and take the skiff out before breakfast.

He was turning from the window when movement in the garden below caught his eye. The candle-light was not strong enough to prevent his seeing a tall figure moving towards the gate. It was Uncle Hilary. Surely he had no need to go out at this time of night? He'd said he was turning in early, and nobody had been to the house since.

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Something in the Rector's attitude held Tom's attention. He could not define it. The priest was looking across to Redlands, though down there on the ground he couldn't see it. Even from the room upstairs Tom could only see the top half of the house.

The Rector removed his shovel hat and passed a hand across his brow and head. Tom knew the mannerism. Uncle Hilary did that only when he was disturbed. Then he left the garden and began to walk along the road away from the direction of Redlands. His head was bent, and his hands were clasped behind him. Yes; obviously something was wrong.

Tom left the window and went and sat on the bed. He felt vaguely disturbed. He told himself that a clergyman must be worried sometimes—all the parish came to him with their troubles and he had to hear them all if he was conscientious—but somehow Tom felt that this was a personal trouble. And in the ordinary way Uncle Hilary wasn't the sort to let his own worries affect him. What had that long stare in the direction of Redlands meant? Coincidence? It would have been, perhaps, had there been no Margery or had the Rector not been in love with her—as probably he was still.

Slowly Tom Manning undressed himself. When finally he blew out his candle he had dismissed the matter from his mind.

He did not sleep well. The intense quiet of the place woke him up. He heard the clock strike twelve and turned over restlessly. Annoyingly his thoughts went back to his uncle, and he became wide awake. After

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what seemed hours he decided to smoke a pipe in order to induce sleep, and got out of bed. The illuminated dial of his wrist watch told him that it was nearly half-past twelve.

He found his pipe and filled it, gazing out of the window the while. He had left the curtains undrawn so that the early morning light should awaken him. An owl hooted in the elms by the church. He was about to strike a match when he heard the sound of hasty footsteps. Round the bend of the road came a tall figure in black. Uncle Hilary! But what was wrong with him? He was hatless and hurrying, tremendously distraught. He paused at the gate and looked up at the house as though undecided. Unconsciously Tom Manning stepped back a pace. The Rector began to walk on. He paused again, passed his hand in a weary fashion over his head and then returned. This time he came into the garden and walked slowly towards the house.

Tom put his unlighted pipe on the table. Whatever the trouble was it was serious if it could so affect the austere priest. Tom hesitated a few moments, then putting on his dressing gown went to the door and listened. He heard movement.

"Uncle Hilary!" he called softly, lest he should awaken the housekeeper.

A startled exclamation, footsteps, and the slight thud of a door and the click of a latch. Tom did not hesitate now. Their affection for each other would excuse his action. He hastily descended the stairs.

The Rector's bedroom was on the ground-floor. He had explained his choice by saying that sometimes he

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was called out at night, and he could be summoned by a tap on his window whereas the front door bell would awaken the housekeeper unnecessarily. It was characteristic of him. Tom went to his room and knocked lightly on the door. No reply. Doubt and apprehension made him hesitate to try the handle. He knocked again and called softly.

"Uncle Hilary!"

Still there was no reply. He tried the handle. The door was locked.

Tom's apprehension grew. It was so completely unlike Uncle Hilary to lock his door or to be secretive in any way. Yet what could he do? No amount of affection would excuse his obtruding himself where he was plainly not wanted. But supposing his uncle were ill? Undecided he went back slowly along the passage, purposely making a noise so that the Rector would know that he was withdrawing.

But he had reckoned without the priest's tender conscience. He heard the click of a lock; the Rector's door opened.

"Tom," called the priest.

Tom ran back along the passage.

"I'm sorry, Uncle," he blurted out. "I—I didn't mean to intrude, but I couldn't sleep, and I saw you come in. I—I thought you were ill or something," he concluded lamely.

The room was in darkness, and he could not see his uncle's face, but he sensed a great disquiet.

"No; I'm all right," answered the priest. "At least," he corrected himself hastily, "I—" He stopped.

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Tom knew that he wanted to hide something but that he couldn't frame a lie.

"Is there anything I can do, Uncle?" he asked wistfully.

The Rector put out a hand and touched his arm. "You're a dear fellow, Tom," he said in a queer strangled voice. "But there's nothing."

Tom put his hand affectionately over his uncle's and squeezed it. Wincing, the priest uttered an exclamation—of pain it seemed to the younger man.

"Why," exclaimed Tom Manning, "what—?"

"It's nothing," said the priest hurriedly. "I—I tripped in a rabbit hole or something and sprained my hand. . . . There, go to bed, old man," he went on. "It's very late, isn't it?"

"Nearly one. All right, Uncle. I'll toddle along. But are you sure—?"

Gently the priest pushed him out of the room and shut the door behind him. Tom went back along the passage and ascended the stairs.

Sleep was impossible now. He was too disturbed. He lit his pipe and sat down by the window, pondering on his uncle's strange behavior.

The moonlight was very bright—the harvest moon, he supposed. It was light enough, almost, to read. He looked out towards Redlands and saw a single light in a top window. It went out as he watched.

The wind sighed in the elms, the clock in the church tower struck a half hour. Tom's head nodded. Presently his pipe fell from his mouth. He slept.

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He awoke with a start to find the housekeeper bending over him and shaking his arm. It was broad daylight.

"I couldn't make you hear, Mr. Tom," she said, "so I came in. Here's your tea."

She was trembling with excitement. Apparently the fact that he was not in bed had not struck her as being odd.

"There's been a murder, Sir," she said in an impressive whisper. "Over at Redlands."

Tom Manning gazed at her blankly. Then the blood drummed in his ears.

"Murder!" he exclaimed. "But—"

"Yes. Mrs. Wharton was found strangled in bed this morning. Sam Gundridge—you know, the village policeman—gave me the news just now. Said that Mr. Wharton told him to ask the Rector to go over to him. He— But, Mr. Tom," she broke off her story, "you 'aven't been to bed."

"Yes; I have," he answered quickly, pointing to the tumbled bed-clothes. "I couldn't sleep, so I came and had a pipe here by the window. I must have dozed off."

"You might have had the house afire," she scolded him, picking up his pipe from the floor and pointing to the tobacco ash on the carpet. "And the Rector 'asn't been to bed, neither. Been working all night, I s'pose. He won't tell me—me, who's been with him these ten years. He's been that queer lately, I 'ardly know where I am."

Tom was impatient to be alone. He soothed the old

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lady and eventually managed to get her out of the room. Then, feeling curiously shaky, he went back to his chair and sat down. His tea was stone cold when finally he tasted it.

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CHAPTER II

MARGERY DISAPPEARS

TOM MANNING scarcely touched his breakfast, which he had alone. He had heard the Rector leave earlier, had seen him mount his bicycle and go off in the direction of Redlands, apparently in answer to Wharton's summons.

The journalist in the young man was hampered by his affection for the priest, but his disquiet evidenced his unpleasant doubts. Uncle Hilary was in love with Margery Wharton, and he was her father's friend. Distraught, the priest had left the house the previous night after he had given the impression that he was going to bed, had shown by his long stare in the direction of Redlands on what his thoughts centered; he had returned in a strange condition, hatless and hurrying and at about half-past twelve, having been absent approximately two hours, had gone straight to his room and, hearing his nephew's voice and apparently fearing his questions, had locked himself in. And when his tender conscience had forced him to open his door finally, he had betrayed intense agitation. Something had happened since half-past ten. And then in the morning had come the housekeeper's announcement of the murder and her revelation that Wharton had sent for the Rector. Why had he sent for him? Could it be

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for the comfort of a friend and a priest? Hardly. Wharton was no weakling: he could stand alone. He—

Tom's train of reflection was suddenly cut short. His uncle had sprained his hand. . . . And Mrs. Wharton had been strangled! The connection between the two thoughts unnerved him. He pushed his plate back and got on to his feet. He could sit there no longer. He felt sick—frightened, too. His faith in his uncle battled with his conviction that between half-past ten and half-past twelve the previous night the Rector had gone to Redlands. There was no proof of it, so far not even circumstantial evidence of it, but—

The housekeeper came in to clear away the breakfast things. She looked at the young man curiously.

"You've eaten very little," she reproved him. "But, of course," she went on, "this affair's upset you. The Rector, poor dear, was in a terrible state when he went out. Couldn't find his hat anywhere, and he's only got one."

The hat! Of course! Tom had forgotten that. Where had the Rector left it? Supposing they found it at Redlands! There could be no mistake as to whose it was.

The housekeeper was rambling on. Partly to escape her garrulity and partly because he had to do something, he said that he was going out. As he left the room he remembered that he was a reporter. *The Planet* would want a "story": he was on the spot. Hideous to have to be a reporter amongst his own friends, though. Besides, he wasn't a crime reporter. If there was any mystery about this business Ravenhill was the man who ought to tackle it.

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He was wasting time. He'd known of the crime over an hour and he hadn't attempted to get a story for *The Planet*. He took his cap and set out for Redlands, thinking hard as he tramped. His faith in his uncle began to revive. Under the greatest provocation Uncle Hilary couldn't commit a crime like that. Besides, he had no motive for doing so. He was completely detached from worldly matters as far as they might affect him personally. He had shown his strength in denying himself love, though his Church did not demand such a sacrifice from him. Ridiculous to think that a man who could resist the greatest of passions should so far lose control of himself as to commit a terrible crime—and that against a woman.

The morning sun increased Tom's optimism, and he covered the half mile to Redlands very quickly. The lodge gate was unguarded—he supposed there were not enough constables available. In the drive he met old Thompson, who kept the lodge and acted as head gardener, and a man whom he recognized as the Whartons' chauffeur.

"Tar'ble business, Sir," Thompson greeted the reporter. "I s'pose you've 'eard about it?"

"The bare fact of the murder," answered Tom. "Have they—? Is it certain that she was murdered?"

"Strangled in 'er bed, Sir, they do say. An' Miss Margery's gone."

"Gone! Why, what the devil do you mean, Thompson?"

"Disappeared, Sir, they do say. 'Er bed ain't bin slep' in. And 'er car ain't in the garridge. She told

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'Ammett," nodding at the chauffeur "last night that she'd 'ad a breakdown at West Billington. Didn't she, 'Ammett?"

"Yes," said the chauffeur. "She told me she'd left the car at Stevens' Garage and that I was to call there about it this morning. I—" He broke off and looked doubtfully at the reporter. "I don't know that I ought to speak about it, Sir," he went on apologetically. "It isn't as if—"

"It ain't no secret," said Thompson. "Inspector Service 'phoned up the garridge soon's 'e came over, but the car wa'n't there, and wot's more," he added impressively, "it never 'ad been there. It's a proper myst'ry, that's wot it is. I dunno wot things be a-coming to when—"

"You talk too much, Thompson," the chauffeur reproved him.

"I'll talk as much as I like," declared Thompson truculently. "I tell 'ee it's a myst'ry—a proper myst'ry. An I ain't telling no tales."

"You're doing your best to," said Hammett, frowning.

"What do you mean by that, Thompson?" demanded Tom. "You don't know anything about it, do you?"

"Of course he doesn't, Sir," said Hammett.

"I ain't saying I don't, an' I ain't sayin' I do," replied the old man exasperatingly, "but as I tells Inspector Service, 'You watch that there Mr. Winter,' I says; an' I wouldn't go fer saying a thing like that fer nothin', would I?"

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"Don't take any notice of him, Sir," advised Hammett.

"You shut up," Thompson scowled at the chauffeur. "There ain't no call for you to play the 'igh and mighty with me, even if you do fancy yourself a cut above me."

Hammett colored a little. "You're talking nonsense, Thompson," he said quietly.

"'Oo's talking nonsense?"

"You oughtn't to make suggestions if there's nothing in them," Tom put in, hoping to excite the old man to be more definite.

Thompson looked back to where the house showed between the great elms. "I ain't got nothin' definite to say," he muttered, "but I do say this: It's a 'appy release for the master, it is. An' I don't care who 'ears me," scowling at Hammett vindictively.

He grunted something under his breath and began to lumber towards the lodge. Hammett watched him go a few paces, then he turned to Tom.

"Don't take any notice of him, Sir," he whispered. "He's talking through his hat." Then he followed the old man.

Puzzled, Tom continued on his way. He got to the elms when he heard a bicycle bell. The Rector pedalled round the bend, his head down, hatless and oblivious of his nephew.

"Uncle!" called Tom.

Hilary Starmer looked up quickly and applied his brakes. Tom saw that his face was white and strained. The priest jumped off the bicycle.

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"Tom," he said, shaking in agitation, "this is awful. Mrs. Wharton's dead—strangled!—and Margery's disappeared!" His lips trembled.

"It's only a coincidence, Uncle," Tom said in a foolish effort to console the priest. "She'll probably turn up soon." He unconsciously seized on the less important mystery.

"She's never gone away like that before." The priest's eyes were wild; they were unrecognizable as his. He looked almost insane. Tom experienced again that sick feeling that had assailed him when he had remembered his uncle's sprained hand. A dreadful thought came to him, so dreadful that he could only stare helplessly at his relative. Supposing he had periods of insanity! Those eyes—

"Where are you going now?" he asked throatily, in an effort to break the spell.

"To find Margery," answered the priest.

He made to mount his bicycle, but the young man restrained him.

"Where will you go, Uncle?" Tom asked as quietly as he could. "You don't know where she's gone."

The priest's lips quivered pathetically. "I must find her," he whispered. "She must be found," he insisted.

The situation was bizarre. Tom looked at his uncle's mad eyes and his quivering mouth. He saw, too, the sunken cheeks. The priest was in a terrible condition. Those sunken cheeks were not the result of fasting; neither could the murder and the disappearance of Margery account for them. He had been suffering for

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months from some secret trouble. Margery, of course. Or was there something else?

Tom looked towards the house. He ought to go up there and make inquiries. He had his paper to serve. But there was his uncle. He must be looked after. He came first.

"Give me the bicycle, Uncle," he said firmly, strong now that he had decided what to do. "I'm going to take you home. You—"

The priest cut him short. He'd got to go and find Margery. He was all right.

"Listen, Uncle," said the young man. "You're not well. No—let me speak. You're not well and you can't search for Margery if you don't know where she is. You've lost control of yourself," he went on brutally, his throat constricted, nevertheless, with remorse. "*I'll* find Margery."

"*You* will!" exclaimed the priest.

"At least," said Tom hastily, "I'll get someone to find her. I've told you about Ravenhill, haven't I? I—"

Someone was coming. He could hear footsteps.

"Let's go quickly, Uncle," he pleaded. "We may be watched, and we don't want—"

The madness had left his uncle's eyes and was replaced by fear.

"We don't want to arouse suspicions, do we?" continued Tom deliberately.

"Oh, dear God!" groaned the priest. "What—? Yes; let's go home."

Tom took the bicycle gently from him and slipping his disengaged hand under his arm led him down the

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drive. Old Thompson was sitting on the doorstep of the lodge. He leered at them as they passed.

"Parson's not well," he observed.

"Go to hell!" Tom snapped, and his listless charge uttered no reproof.

After that neither spoke until they were back at the Rectory. Tom had taken complete command. He left the bicycle propped against a fence, and praying that Mrs. Banks might be out of the way he led his uncle into the study. The priest dropped into a chair. Tom offered him a cigarette, then remembered that he did not smoke. He lit one for himself and drawing up a chair sat down. He felt very calm.

"Uncle," he said, "won't you tell me all about it?"

The priest's head was bent. He looked up at his nephew, and the haggard face made Tom glance away hurriedly. Then:

"You've got to tell me, Uncle Hilary," he said determinedly. "You're not well, you know, and you're not strong enough to stand alone. I wouldn't force your confidence—you know that—but there's going to be the very devil of a mess if you go blundering on as you are. Do you realize, Uncle," he forced himself to say, "that the police will be making inquiries everywhere and that you might even be suspected of the murder of Mrs. Wharton?"

He had not meant to say quite so much. The priest let out his breath in a long sigh, and his muscles seemed to relax. His whole body sagged.

"Uncle!" exclaimed the boy urgently. "You were out last night. Something happened. I—Oh, forgive me,

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Uncle, I'm not really suspicious, but I must know. Where did you go? What did you do?"

A long silence. Tom could hear the housekeeper moving about overhead. A robin sang his melancholy song in the garden.

"I don't know," answered the priest.

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CHAPTER III

TOM MANNING gazed at his uncle in stupefaction.

"I don't know," repeated the priest. "I don't remember what happened."

"But surely," protested Tom, "you were all right when you left here. Do you mean you lost your memory?" Then, as Hilary Starmer hesitated, "Look here, Uncle," he went on, "you've got to tell me everything. Why did you go out last night, and where did you go?"

The priest sighed. "I was disturbed," he said at last. "I—"

"What about?" demanded Tom. "I must know."

"It's not altogether my secret," said the priest. "How can I—?"

"You must. There's been a murder since then," Tom pointed out. "And someone's going to be charged with it," he added grimly.

His uncle shivered. "Terence Wharton was up here just before you arrived," he said weakly. "He's—he's always brought his trouble to me. Besides—" His voice trailed off, and his thoughts apparently wandered. Tom roused him.

"Try to concentrate, Uncle," he urged him. "Was it about Margery?"

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Hilary Starmer looked startled. He half rose from his chair and then fell back.

"Sorry, Uncle," the young man said compassionately. "But you're not a good actor, you know." He looked wistfully at the priest. "Won't you forget that I'm only a nephew," he went on, "and tell me all about it? You—you love Margery, don't you?"

"Yes," whispered the priest, gripping the arms of his chair. "I've loved her terribly." A new energy had come to him. Words poured from his mouth in a torrent. "I fell in love with her when the Whartons first came here . . . I was mad. I'm a priest—and besides I'm much older than she is. It's been—hell!"

The boy nodded sympathetically.

"I fought down the love. I even scourged myself. I avoided her and tried to cut her out of my life. But she was there all the time. You wouldn't understand—"

"Yes, I do," Tom contradicted him. "I know what an awful time you must have had. Rightly or wrongly —it doesn't matter—you resolved to remain celibate." He chose his words carefully.

The priest's eyes showed his gratitude.

"I was sure that I stood a chance, that was the trouble," he went on. "If it'd been hopeless it would have been easier. But although I am so much older than she is, she did not seem—Oh, you understand. Then young Winter appeared on the scene. He's a good fellow, and Margery seemed to get fond of him. Everyone thought they'd get engaged. I hoped they would. It would have made things easier for me." He stopped.

"Go on," prompted Tom Manning.

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"Her father told me a month ago he was sure he'd be able to announce the engagement soon," the priest resumed presently. "Then last night when he came over here—I oughtn't to tell you, Tom."

"You must. What did he tell you?"

"It was about Mrs. Wharton. He'd—he'd discovered that she and Winter were—well, there was a liaison."

Tom remembered the rumors he had heard about her in connection with other men. There was a particularly unsavory story from India.

"Was he sure of it?" he asked.

"He had ample proof. And Margery knew of it, too. I'd seen there was something wrong with her. Wharton said he'd surprised her in the summer house that afternoon and she—she was crying." The priest gulped. "She wouldn't tell him what was wrong, but he guessed."

"And he came to ask your advice?" asked Tom.

"Not exactly," sighed his uncle. "He'd already made up his mind to act. Talked about divorce. Of course, it upset me dreadfully. I was sorry for my friend and—and more than sorry for Margery. And we were back where we started. Can't you see?"

"You mean," said Tom, "that you'd got to fight your battle all over again! Yes, I understand."

He looked at his watch surreptitiously. While he listened to his uncle he was uncomfortably aware of the fact that he was delaying his report of the murder to *The Planet*.

"And last night?" he prompted gently.

"When you'd gone to bed," said the Rector wearily, "I knew I shouldn't be able to sleep, so I went out. I

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don't know in which direction I went, but presently I found myself on Barrow Hill looking down upon Redlands. I felt very queer. It seems so unfair that we should all have to bear this trouble because a wretched woman couldn't control herself. She—but what am I saying? She's dead." He covered his face with his hands.

"You felt very bitter against her?" suggested Tom.

"God forgive me, I did!" groaned the priest. "Divorce was no way out of the muddle for Wharton, and it wouldn't help Margery—or me. Beside I couldn't countenance divorce. She was making innocent people suffer, and her life was worthless to others. Impiously I told myself that it was better if she were dead."

"In other words that she ought to die?"

"You scourge me," whispered the priest, "but you're right. I realized how wicked I was and hated myself for it. Then I started to come home. A minute or two afterwards I caught my foot in a rabbit hole and fell."

He passed his hand over his head.

"That's where you lost your hat," commented Tom.

"Eh? Did I lose it? I—"

"Well, what happened next?" asked Tom impatiently.

"I must have struck my head on a stone or something, for I don't remember what happened until I found myself in the drive at Redlands."

Tom could not restrain an exclamation.

"And I was coming away from the house," added the priest somberly.

"You mean that what happened between your fall

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and your finding yourself in the drive is a complete blank?"

"Yes."

Tom was frowning hard. The story was incredible, and he knew that no jury would accept it. Besides—

"When did you sprain your hand?" he asked gently.

Horror dawned in the priest's eyes. "And she was strangled!" he whispered. "I must have done it, then! Oh, my God, my God!"

He rose unsteadily to his feet, gazed wildly on his nephew and then before Tom could get to him collapsed on to the floor.

For a few moments Tom's presence of mind deserted him. The Rector lay motionless and stiff. While the young man stood there the front door bell rang. He heard Mrs. Banks come down the stairs and walk along the hall.

"Is Mr. Manning here?" asked a voice.

Ravenhill! Tom went hastily to the study door and opened it.

"Here I am," he called.

Mrs. Banks gave a squeal of alarm. "I didn't hear you come in," she complained.

Beyond her stood a tall thin faced young man dressed in tweeds.

"Hullo, Manning!" he called.

"All right, Mrs. Banks," said Tom confusedly, "I'll look after him." He looked warningly at the newcomer, who came into the hall. Mrs. Banks retired, muttering, and went back upstairs.

"You're for the high jump, young man," said Raven-

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hill. "Why didn't you get a story through? Jevons is—" He broke off. "What's wrong?" he asked in a different tone.

"Devil of a mess," mumbled Tom Manning.

He drew his friend into the study and pointed to the figure on the floor.

"He's had a shock," he explained inadequately.

Ravenhill went down on one knee beside the Rector.

"Stroke," he announced. "Have you sent for a doctor?"

"Not yet."

Ravenhill stared. "Why not?"

"It's only just happened. Besides, he's my uncle and host, and—and—" He thought wildly. He mustn't reveal the Rector's secret. "He's a friend of the Whartons," he said at last.

"The woman who was murdered?"

"Well, he is a friend of her husband and daughter. I don't know about Mrs. Wharton."

Ravenhill grunted. "Where's the 'phone?" he demanded.

"Isn't one."

"Well, you'll have to get a doctor—quick. There's a bicycle propped against the fence outside. Take that and go. Go on. Hurry, man! I'll tell the old woman. What's her name?"

"Mrs. Banks," answered Tom Manning. Already dominated by the other's personality he was moving towards the door. "All right, Ravenhill," he said. "Shan't be long."

He went out into the garden and taking the Rec-

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tor's cycle wheeled it onto the road and mounted. In a few minutes he had reached the doctor's house.

Doctor Dormer was over at Redlands, he was told. He let out an oath and was turning away when he remembered the telephone.

"Will you 'phone him at once?" he asked the maid. "Tell him that the Rector's had a stroke. He's at the Rectory."

Then he pedalled furiously back.

Between them Ravenhill and the housekeeper had carried the Rector to his room. He was still unconscious. Ten minutes after Tom returned Doctor Dormer arrived in his car. He quickly confirmed Ravenhill's diagnosis of the case. He looked very serious.

"We'll have to get a nurse," he declared. "I'll telephone for one. Leave me with him now."

Mrs. Banks was tearful, and it was hard to get her from the room, but eventually she consented to go. Tom and Ravenhill returned to the study.

"Unless you've got anything to tell me," said Ravenhill, "I'll get across to Redlands right away. You haven't explained yet why you didn't get a story through. Is *he* involved?" he asked directly.

Tom gulped. How damnably acute the fellow was!

"Tell me what you know," said Ravenhill quietly.

"I don't know much," he said. "Mrs. Wharton was found dead in bed this morning—strangled. You know that much, I suppose?"

"Yes, the local man got it from the police at West Billington almost at once and 'phoned it through, and I came down by the first train."

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"It's a complicated business," Tom went on. He told the reporter all he knew, omitting only the story of his uncle's night excursion. He had just finished when the doctor's voice could be heard in the hall. Tom went and brought him into the study.

"I think he'll be all right," he announced. "What caused him to crumple up like that?"

"Shock, I suppose," answered Tom Manning. "He'd just been to see Wharton, and we were speaking of the affair in here when he suddenly dropped."

The doctor looked at him suspiciously and pursed his lips. He made no comment, however. Instead:

"Wharton's been arrested," he announced.

"What!" exclaimed Tom, and sat down suddenly, feeling curiously weak. He sighed in relief without realizing it.

"Yes; he's confessed," added the doctor. "I suppose there's no harm in telling you. He quarreled with his wife before they went to bed last night. But I mustn't go into details."

"Did he confess to murdering her?" asked Ravenhill.

"Didn't I say he did?" snapped the doctor.

"No," said Ravenhill. "You said he'd confessed; that's all."

"I don't see any difference. And of course I don't know what he told Inspector Service."

"When did she die, Doctor?"

"She'd been dead about seven hours when I saw her body at nine o'clock."

"That means she died at two o'clock. Did they go to bed late?"

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"My dear Sir, I'm a doctor, not a detective. How should I know?"

Ravenhill shrugged his shoulders.

"You'll hold an autopsy, of course," he said.

"It is usual," said the doctor, "though it'll scarcely be necessary in this case. Death was plainly due to heart failure consequent upon strangulation."

"A clear case as far as you're concerned, Doctor. Unless they went to bed late, Wharton apparently got up at two o'clock and went and murdered his wife in cold blood. Extraordinary crime for a country gentleman to commit. . . . By the way, Doctor, do you know a man named Spence—Rufus Spence?"

"The poacher? I know *of* him. Why?"

"Very observant man and, of course, a night bird. I just wanted to verify his name, that's all. There's someone at Redlands named Winter, isn't there?"

"I don't know why you should ask me all these questions, Sir," retorted the doctor irritably.

"A reporter's privilege," answered Ravenhill. "But you haven't answered me."

"Mr. Winter is Miss Wharton's fiancé," said the doctor stiffly. "And he's staying at Redlands. Why?"

Ravenhill ignored the question. "Well, I must get along up to the house," he said.

Tom had listened to the little duel between doctor and reporter with some surprise, but the predominant feeling in his mind was one of relief. Wharton had confessed to the murder, and it took place at approximately two o'clock. Thus even if Wharton's confession did not prove his guilt—as Ravenhill had seemed to suggest—

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the time of the crime cleared the Rector. The Rector had been indoors just after half-past twelve, and Tom was positive that he had not gone out again. There was no need now, therefore, for complete secrecy.

"Ravenhill," he whispered, "I didn't tell you everything."

"I know," answered the reporter. "But it'll keep. I mustn't wait here any longer. Will you be here when I return? I may have to stay a few days," he hinted.

"You can stay here," said Tom. "The Rector would be delighted."

The doctor was writing when he returned to the study. He looked up at Tom.

"I don't like your friend," he said. "Impertinent young man."

"Anthony Ravenhill's the cleverest crime-reporter in London," Tom defended his friend warmly.

The doctor's face was comic. "Why didn't he tell me who he was?" he demanded. "If I'd known he was Anthony Ravenhill I'd—"

"Why should he tell you?" answered Tom stiffly. "What about my uncle?"

"The nurse should be here at any time," said Dr. Dormer. "I sent the garden boy with a message to my wife to 'phone the Cottage Hospital. Mrs. Banks is with the Rector now."

"Doctor," said Tom Manning abruptly, "do you believe that Wharton killed his wife?"

"Hasn't he confessed it? Between you and me, Manning, the case is as clear as day, only I didn't want to say so in front of your friend. Mrs. Wharton had been

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carrying on with young Winter almost all the time he's been down here. Everybody knew it—except Wharton. But he must have discovered it at last. Starr, the butler, told the Inspector that there was a violent quarrel in Mrs. Wharton's bedroom last night."

"What I can't understand," said Tom, "is what has become of Margery."

"Ah!" commented the doctor. "There was no love lost between her and her stepmother."

"Stepmother!" exclaimed Tom. "But I'd always understood that Mrs. Wharton was her mother."

"That's what most people think," chuckled the doctor, as though the matter were amusing.

Tom heard the squeak of brakes and the hoot of a motor horn.

"That's the nurse, I expect," said the doctor. "I'll just go and have a look at my patient again. Show the nurse to the Rector's room, will you?"

Tom followed him out of the room and went to the front door, opening it just as a figure ran up the steps.

It was Margery!

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CHAPTER IV

THE SECOND CRIME

TOM was too amazed to speak. A second car pulling up at that moment gave him respite. A nurse alighted and came up the path.

"I want to see the Rector," said Margery in a tense voice.

"Come into the study," he answered her and led her along the hall. "I shan't be a minute," he told her as he opened the door. She went inside and he ran back and escorted the nurse to his uncle's room. Then he returned to Margery.

"Where is the Rector?" she demanded. She had not sat down.

"He's had a stroke," Tom replied simply.

The girl gave a pathetic little moan and held onto a chair.

"Can I help?" asked the young man putting out his hand to support her. "Won't you sit down? Why do you want to see my Uncle?"

She sat down and looked up at him, her eyes tired and miserable. "Oh, Tom," she exclaimed wearily, "what does it all mean?"

Tom suddenly remembered that her father had been arrested. Did she know? Did she even know of the murder? Where had she come from?

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She looked so pathetic that he could ask no questions.

"I saw about it in the paper," she said. "Is it true?"

"Yes; your stepmother's dead," answered Tom. He thought it best to be direct.

"Stepmother!" she exclaimed. "What *do* you mean? She was my mother."

Tom, as surprised as she was, could not help noticing the new look on her face. It was one of relief. And he was puzzled. That pompous, obstinate doctor was not exactly an accurate man, but surely he would not say anything of which he was not reasonably certain. Perhaps it was only a silly rumor. After all, the Whartons had been at Stanmead but a short time, and the doctor was not likely to be a friend of Wharton's. Not his sort at all. They'd probably never done more than pass the time of day.

"I'm sorry, Margery," he apologized awkwardly. "I made a mistake."

"But where did you—? What made you say that?" she insisted.

He had to tell her. She looked somehow disappointed. "Doctor Dormer's no right to start such a ridiculous rumor," she said in a queer voice.

It suddenly occurred to him that she had made no further inquiry about the Rector.

"Why did you want to see my uncle?" he asked.

"He—" She stopped. "Are you very fond of your uncle?" she asked.

"Of course," he answered, bewildered. "He was my guardian. He— But I don't understand, Margery."

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"Has he told you anything?"

"Won't you explain what you mean?" he countered. A vague fear made him cautious.

Her weariness had gone. She was leaning forward, and her eyes sought an answer. This girl of twenty had suddenly become compelling. She was a woman with a definite purpose who was "sounding" him—a man of the world. The metamorphosis from the pleasure-loving, irresponsible girl whom he had known was more than his experience contained. Yet his ingenuousness restricted her advantage.

"Look here," he exclaimed boyishly. "There's no reason why you and I should be secretive. I don't know what you're getting at, Margery. Put your cards on the table, and I will mine—if I've got any."

She regarded him soberly. "You don't suspect me of —you know?" she said, her voice faltering a little.

"Good God! Of course not."

She flushed at his vehemence.

"I suppose you weren't in your uncle's confidence?" she went on, and before he could answer, "No; he wouldn't tell anyone. I know that he is my father's friend, and my father probably told him most things."

Tom could not see her motive. She was talking very strangely, considering everything.

"You think me queer," she said, as though she had guessed his thought. "My mother has apparently been murdered, and yet I can sit here and talk about things calmly. I haven't even been over to the house yet to see—her." Her attitude was defiant. "Need I explain?"

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She seemed melodramatic, and yet he knew that she was not.

"I think I understand," he said awkwardly.

"The paper I saw this morning said that my mother had been murdered—strangled," she continued in a low voice. "It also said that I was missing and that my —my fiancé and Father had no idea where I was. By fiancé they meant Vivian Winter, but we're not engaged."

There were tears in her eyes now—indignant tears, Tom thought.

"Where were you?" he asked.

She appeared disconcerted, but she answered frankly. "In London. I left home at about quarter to twelve last night and got to London at three o'clock. I put up at Weston's Hotel in Grosvenor Road. I sent a wire yesterday telling them I was coming."

Tom was trying to fit things together.

"When I left the house I saw the Rector in the garden on a seat," she said abruptly.

Tom started. He felt suddenly sick.

"Now you can see why I've come here," she said.

"He didn't do it," he whispered.

"Oh, Tom," she exclaimed, and laughed hysterically. It was the first sign of emotion that she had shown. "Did you think that I thought that of Hilary Starmer?"

Shamed, Tom could only reply unintelligibly.

"I came here first of all to warn him to say nothing about his being there," she explained. "The police wouldn't—wouldn't understand."

"He doesn't know he was there," Tom declared.

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"He'd had a fall earlier and lost his memory or something. He came to, to find himself in the drive."

"But he spoke to—" Margery flushed and stopped. Tom stared at her, horror-struck.

"Spoke to you?" he muttered. "But—"

Which was he to believe, his uncle or Margery? The choice was impossible. And he saw by Margery's face that a hideous fear was born in her. Then she shook her head defiantly as though to expel the thought.

"Tom," she said, "let's trust him, even if we don't understand."

She was wonderful. Surely she loved him! Yet the thought made him limp. And the cynical journalist in him told him that she did not yet know of her father's arrest. When she did would she still stand by the priest?

He heard footsteps in the hall. The doctor! He'd forgotten all about him.

"You don't want to be seen, do you?" he asked the girl quietly. "I mean, you'd rather not be questioned?"

She too had heard the footsteps. She looked a little frightened. Tom went quickly to the door, opened it and passed into the hall, shutting the door behind him.

"The nurse'll manage all right," said Doctor Dormer. "I'll look in again later on. Expect I shall be busy with the post-mortem this afternoon, though. By the way," he added, "tell your newspaper friend that he can count on me to help him as far as I can—as far as I can. Good-bye."

Tom let the doctor out and went back to the study. He had had time to think, and as soon as he sat down he asked a question.

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"Why did you go away like that?"

"Because I couldn't stand any more," she answered without hesitation. "I've got a little money of my own, and I'm twenty-one." She looked at him defiantly. "Do you blame me!"

"I don't know the circumstances," he pointed out. "Even if I'd any right to—" He paused. No; that sounded stilted.

Margery's face was flushed. "Life at Redlands has been— terrible these last few weeks," she explained vaguely. "I couldn't stand any more, so I made up my mind to go."

Then she did love Winter! Obviously she was referring to her mother's liaison with the man. Somewhat chilled, Tom resumed his questioning.

"But why did you go secretly?"

"How can I make you understand? I feared that if I told Daddy he would plead with me not to go, and I couldn't have resisted him." Her eyes filled with tears.

"Margery," said Tom earnestly, "don't you see that the police are bound to be suspicious about it? It *was* a coincidence, wasn't it? For heaven's sake don't think I'm suspecting you!" he exclaimed quickly as her face paled. "How could I? Besides, it wasn't really a coincidence," he corrected himself. "Things had come to a climax."

She looked at him, puzzled.

"I mean," he exclaimed, "you couldn't stand any more, and your father—" He stopped suddenly conscious that he was about to voice his belief in Wharton's

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guilt. And he didn't believe that, even though Wharton was supposed to have confessed.

He saw dawning comprehension in the girl's eyes, and his brain worked furiously.

"What do you mean?" she asked faintly.

She had to know sooner or later. "Your father has made a statement," he said, looking away from her. "He's—he's confessed."

"Confessed!" she whispered incredulously. "But he didn't do it. Oh, Tom, they don't think he did it, do they?"

She looked terribly ill, and her eyes were big with fear. He suddenly got up from his chair and went and put an arm round her shoulders.

"Don't look like that, Margery," he pleaded. "It'll all come right. Of course, your father isn't guilty, and he'll be cleared. There, don't cry," he continued awkwardly, his arm tightening about her. He had sunk onto one knee beside her before he realized what he was doing.

She cried against his shoulder, while he racked his brain for a means of comforting her. If her father were not guilty there was the awful alternative that his uncle was—so far as he with his limited data could determine.

"It's bound to come right," he said desperately. "There are few miscarriages of justice nowadays. Look here, let's go to Redlands and see Ravenhill—I've told you about him, haven't I? He's gone to make enquiries."

"But—but what can he do?" she sobbed. "Oh, poor Daddy! Is he—in prison?"

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"I don't know," Tom answered. "Come, dry your eyes, and let's go. I'll go and see my uncle, first."

He left her and went along the passage. Knocking lightly at the door of his uncle's room, he opened it and looked inside. The nurse who was bending over her patient turned round, and put a finger to her lips. Mrs. Banks was standing beside her.

"How is he?" Tom asked.

"Asleep," the nurse answered briefly.

He shut the door and rejoined Margery. She had dried her eyes and was ready to leave, though obviously she was very nervous. Circumstances had changed considerably during the last half hour as far as she was concerned.

Several villagers stood round her car when the two left the house.

"There she is!" one called out.

She shrank back. Tom slipped an arm through hers and whispered to her not to be alarmed. Apparently the villagers were not unanimous in their feelings towards her, neither were they sufficiently bold to make a demonstration. Tom helped his companion into the car and took the wheel himself.

A few minutes later the car entered the drive at Redlands and Tom drove slowly up to the house. A constable came down the steps. When he saw Margery his mouth opened as though he would say something; it remained open. He was plainly puzzled as to what to do.

"Where's Inspector Service?" asked Tom.

"With one of the gents from London," answered the

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constable. "Over there." He pointed vaguely westward.

Tom supposed he meant a detective, and wondered. Evidently the case was not as clear as the doctor had suggested.

"What'll you do?" Tom asked the girl.

"Go to my room," she answered. She opened the door of the car and got out. "Would you mind putting the car in the garage?" She smiled wanly. "You've been awfully good, Tom."

She hesitated a moment, her hands nervously screwing her handkerchief. Then without another word she ran up the steps and entered the house.

Tom drove the car round the back of the house and garaged it, and then returned to the constable.

"What's happened?" he asked bluntly. "I mean, are there any developments?"

The policeman looked at him doubtfully. "Mr. Wharton's been arrested," he said at length, "and they've taken the body over to the mortuary at West Billington."

"Do you know Mr. Ravenhill?" Tom described him briefly.

"That's the man with the Inspector, Sir," said the constable at once. "They're somewhere in that wood." He pointed again to the west.

Tom set off across the park, towards the wood, his thoughts obsessed with the memory of Margery as he had last seen her. Poor girl! She was in for a bad time, he reflected. He had given her to understand that he believed in her father's innocence, yet in view of the

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knowledge which he possessed he could not but believe Wharton to be guilty. If Wharton were roused to passionate anger, he was the sort of man who might kill. It was well-known that Mrs. Wharton had had no regard for common decency. Wharton had been long-suffering, but the last "affair" in which the man who was commonly supposed would soon be his son-in-law was involved had been too much. Tom could picture the quarrel, could see Wharton, goaded beyond endurance, take his wife by the throat. Perhaps he had meant merely to frighten her and had underestimated his own strength. . . . Poor Margery! She—

Tom's train of thought came to an abrupt end, and he halted. Without his realizing it he had been following a path. At his feet lay a clerical hat.

His heart thumped and blood roared in his ears, but somehow he managed to retain his presence of mind. In all probability he was watched, perhaps from the house, perhaps from the wood. He put his hand in his pocket and brought out his cigarette case from which he extracted a cigarette. Then, looking with apparent idleness round the landscape he put the cigarette between his lips and the case slipped from his hand. He bent down and parted the grass at the side of the path as though searching for it. At the same time with his other hand he screwed the clerical hat into as small a compass as possible, picked up the cigarette case and returned it to his waistcoat pocket. The hat found its way into his breast pocket.

It was not a brilliant effort at deception but if he were watched but perfunctorily it would serve.

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Then he continued his way to the wood.

He found Ravenhill and Inspector Service sitting on a fallen tree and smoking.

"This is my colleague on *The Planet*," Ravenhill introduced him to the Inspector, "and the Rector's nephew."

Tom shook hands.

"How is the Rector?" asked the Inspector.

"He's sleeping now," said Tom briefly, wondering how much the policeman knew.

"Was that Miss Wharton you brought to the house with you?" asked Ravenhill laconically.

Tom was aware of the Inspector's close scrutiny. "Yes," he answered. "She'd been to London and came back as soon as she heard the news."

Ravenhill nodded. Tom was acutely conscious of the hat in his pocket. Evidently the two had been watching the house and must have seen his approach to the wood.

"Did she say why she parked her car in this wood last night?" queried the Inspector casually.

Tom was startled. "I didn't know she had," he answered. "How do you know?"

Ravenhill knocked out the ashes from his pipe. "She took the car out at eight-thirty last night, returned without it at ten o'clock and told Hammett, the chauffeur, that she had had a breakdown and had left the car at a garage at West Billington where he was to call for it in the morning. Some time after eleven o'clock and before eleven-thirty she left the house, picked up the car here and drove away—to London, I suppose. Isn't that right, Inspector?"

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"Seems like it," grunted Service.

"But how do you know that?" asked Tom bewildered.

"She left enough clues," chuckled Ravenhill. "You can see where the car stood at the edge of the wood. It was backed in off the road over there and driven out the same way. Length and width and a patch on the near front tire prove it to be hers. Starr, the butler, shut up the house at eleven o'clock, and the French window of the drawing room was found open by Winter, Miss Wharton's fiancé—"

"They're not engaged," said Tom quickly.

Ravenhill raised his eyebrows. "Well, engaged or not, he found the French window open at eleven-thirty."

"What was he doing at eleven-thirty?" asked Tom suspiciously.

"He came down for a book which he'd left in the drawing room. Couldn't sleep," he said.

"But why should Margery—Miss Wharton—go out by the French window?"

"Because the front-door bolts are squeaky."

"She only went because she couldn't stand any more," said Tom inconsequently. Then, "Is it true that Wharton has confessed?"

"Yes," answered the Inspector.

"Then why are you still investigating?"

"We're not," the policeman pointed out, grinning. "We're smoking and enjoying the view."

Tom frowned. How could the man be so flippant when murder had been done and the Law would demand a life in return?

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"What about this fellow Winter?" Tom asked for no reason whatsoever.

Neither Ravenhill nor the Inspector answered. Both were looking intently towards the drive. Tom followed their gaze. A figure moved away from the house down the drive. It began to run; at the same moment a gun-shot sounded. The figure crumpled up and fell.

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CHAPTER V

THE WATCHERS OF THE NIGHT

THE watchers began to run towards the man who lay on the drive. Ravenhill suddenly altered his direction so that his objective appeared to be the continuation of the wood which they had just left and which went in a half circle round the house and finished at the main road.

In a couple of minutes Tom and the Inspector reached the casualty. The constable was already there bending over him. The man was lying on his face.

"Shot in the back, Sir," he reported. "It's Mr. Winter."

The Inspector bent down and made a quick examination. "Bandage him up and bring him along," he commanded curtly. He stood up; then without another word he began to run towards the house.

Tom, bending over Winter, thought at first that he was dead, but he found that the pulse in his wrist was still beating faintly.

"We'd better get him inside at once," he told the constable. He looked round and then pointed to the side of the road where a hurdle had been stuck in the turf apparently to divert pedestrians from a worn path. "See if you can get that thing up," he commanded.

The hurdle was easily wrenched from the turf. The

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constable dragged it to the drive; then he and Tom Manning lifted the unconscious man onto it, laying him on his face.

"Queer no one's come from the house," commented the constable as he straightened himself.

"The shot wasn't very loud," Tom pointed out. "Besides, a shot isn't an uncommon sound in the country —especially in the autumn."

The policeman nodded slowly. "Well, let's get him along," he said, looking at the wounded man. "He's bleeding like a pig, and we've nothing to bandage him with."

Together they carried Winter to the house. In the hall Margery was talking to the Inspector.

"Is he badly hurt?" she exclaimed as they halted.

She was very pale. She looked fearfully at their burden. Tom, watching her closely, tried to guess her thoughts. Did she care? Surely she was behaving strangely. She would have been more compassionate had Winter been an entire stranger.

Tom became aware of the presence of a sixth person, motionless behind Margery. Then he saw who it was.

"Which is Mr. Winter's room, Starr?" he asked the shadowed figure.

The butler came forward. "Surely nothing is wrong?" he asked, looking enquiringly at Margery.

"Come!" exclaimed the Inspector impatiently. "We can't wait about here all day. Show them the way to Mr. Winter's room."

Starr hurried to do as he was bidden. The Inspector hustled the stretcher bearers up the stairs. "You know

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first aid, Gundridge," he said to the constable. "Stop that bleeding if you can."

Laboriously the wounded man was carried upstairs. As soon as he had been put upon his bed and the constable was attending to him, Tom came down again. Margery stood where he had left her, her hand to her mouth.

"What does it mean?" she whispered.

He shook his head. "Where is he?" he asked, meaning the Inspector.

She did not answer, but instead seized his arm.

"Did you know they'd taken my—my father away?" she demanded in a whisper.

He stammered something.

"If he is guilty," she went on tensely, "why—how came Mr. Winter to be shot?"

It was a shrewd question. But Wharton had confessed to murdering his wife—so report said.

Tom became aware of several servants standing in the shadow of the staircase. "Let's find Ravenhill," he said, drawing the girl to the front door.

"No one is to leave," the Inspector commanded. He was standing at the study door.

"But surely—" began Tom, and then realized the futility of argument.

The Inspector looked along the hall towards the group of servants. "I want all the servants in here, please," he said crisply, pointing to the room they had just left.

Four frightened women and a boy came awkwardly along the hall.

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"Is anyone absent?" demanded the Inspector.

"Mr. Starr and the chauffeur—Mr. Hammett—Sir," said one of the women.

"Starr's upstairs," commented Inspector Service. "Where's the chauffeur?"

"He went out to look after Miss Margery's car," said the boy.

"Go and tell him I want him, then. The rest of you come in here."

The boy disappeared. The others filed into the study.

"Why am I to be detained, Inspector?" asked Margery coldly.

"Sorry, Miss Wharton," answered the policeman. "I can't make exceptions, can I? Mr. Winter's just been shot. Someone shot him, and that someone may be in the house. I want you to show me over the place while Mr.—" he looked doubtfully at Tom, who supplied his name.

"—Mr. Manning remains here—on guard, if he likes to put it so." He jerked his head meaningly towards the servants in the study.

"Very well," assented Margery.

Tom was left alone with his thoughts. So much had happened since he went to bed the previous night that he was unable to think clearly. Two crimes had been committed, several people had behaved in a very strange and suspicious way, one had confessed to perpetrating the first crime and had been arrested, yet a second crime had followed almost immediately. That the two crimes were connected he could not doubt. Murder and attempted murder were not such commonplace events

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that he could entertain the idea that the one crime had no connection with the other. The strange part about the whole affair was that Wharton undoubtedly killed his wife because of her liaison with Winter and that human passion might cause him to kill Winter too, but obviously Wharton could not be guilty of the second crime—unless he had escaped from custody, which was unlikely. It was a possibility, though. Tom wondered whether it had occurred to the Inspector.

And why had Service made Margery show him over the house? He must have been over it before, earlier in the day. Did he suspect Margery?

The thought made him shiver, but hard on top of it came the realization that she was involved. Was she not popularly supposed to be engaged to Winter? And might not the Inspector argue that if she had loved him, jealousy of his "affair" with her mother provided motive for her attempting to kill him.

The situation was horribly bizarre and yet horribly possible, considering the extent to which human passion could carry a person.

Tom realized that his thoughts were running away with him. First he had suspected his uncle; now he was suspecting Margery. Suspecting Margery! The thought made him feel limp. Of course, she was innocent. She had never loved Winter.

The hall was oppressively hot. Tom eased his collar and began to pace up and down. A knock on the front door made him pause. He hesitated. The knock was repeated impatiently. He opened the door. Ravenhill stepped inside.

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"Where's the Inspector?" he demanded.

Tom told him. Ravenhill went to the foot of the stairs and called. Tom was startled to see that he held an automatic pistol by the muzzle, his hand wrapped in his handkerchief.

The Inspector, closely followed by Margery, came downstairs. The reporter held up the pistol.

"Here's the gun," he said in a low voice. "The man made off through the kitchen garden and threw it away as he ran."

"Did you see him?" demanded Service.

"No, but you can see the way he went—footprints. Tall man, judging by his stride."

Ravenhill laid the pistol gingerly on the hall table, and the Inspector bent over it. But only for a second.

"We'd better get outside," he said. "Wish I had some more men here. Oughtn't to have sent 'em back." He packed the automatic in his handkerchief and put it in his breast pocket. "I'll go up and give the constable instructions," he went on. "Will you 'phone up the station—West Billington 004—and tell the sergeant to send up a couple of men at once to report to me here? Miss Wharton, I won't detain you any longer."

"And the servants?" she asked.

"I don't want them at present."

He wasted no more time but ran swiftly up the stairs. He was down within a couple of minutes.

"Good man, Gundridge," he said. "He's stopped the bleeding."

"What's happened to the doctor?" asked Tom.

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"Gone to the mortuary, I expect. . . . Now then, Mr. Ravenhill, are you ready?"

Tom asked permission to accompany them. With apparent reluctance the Inspector consented.

Ravenhill led them round the house to the kitchen garden.

"He came from the wood," he said pointing to the nearest of the trees. "His footprints show practically everything that he did. I'll show you afterwards. I take it you want to get after him now?" he asked, looking at the Inspector.

Service nodded.

"There's his trail," said Ravenhill, pointing to a heel mark in the mould. "Went right through the cabbages to the wicket gate. Incidentally he came in that way."

Keeping to one side of the footprints the three went quickly towards the gate.

"That's where I found the pistol," said Ravenhill. "It'd broken off a cabbage leaf and was lying just beyond it. See the leaf?"

Outside the garden the stiff grass held no tracks. The nearest part of the wood was but thirty yards away. By common consent the three crossed the stretch of grass.

"He's unarmed now," panted the Inspector as he ran. "That means he doesn't contemplate suicide and he's counting on getting away—otherwise he'd have kept the pistol."

At the edge of the wood they halted, looking for tracks. It was Tom who found one in the soft mud of a stream.

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"He's crossed here," commented Service.

Ravenhill had leapt the brook and was bending over the ground. "Here they are," he called. "He's making a bee-line for somewhere. What's in that direction?" pointing due north-west.

"Let's see—that'd be Daincey Green. Woods all the way, too."

"That means he knows the locality, doesn't it?" asked Tom shyly.

"Good for you!" the Inspector complimented him.

"Is there a railway station there, Inspector?" asked Ravenhill.

"No; there's no station this way for six miles. There's a 'bus service from Worthing, though. Goes to Rorsham. I don't know what time it gets to Daincey."

"Let's hurry," urged Ravenhill.

But there were no more footprints to be found, or at least the pursuers could not afford time to cast round for tracks. And it was safe to assume that the fugitive was making for Daincey Green. He must not be allowed to get to the omnibus stop or he might get clean away. He had only to travel a short distance, alight and take to the open country again, to be lost completely. A considerable time must elapse before the pursuers could get a car to follow the 'bus.

The Inspector was heavily built and middle-aged. The pace was too much for him, and soon they had to slow down to a fast walk. In the last half mile to the village he was showing signs of considerable distress.

A few loungers stood in the village street. Evidently they recognized the policeman.

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"What time does the 'bus arrive, Bill?" he called to one of them.

"It's gone," the man answered. "'Bout quarter of an hour ago. There ain't another till 'arf arfter two."

The Inspector swore fluently. "Did anyone board her here?" he asked.

"Ay. Old Missus Newpenny and a Londoner."

"How do you know he was a Londoner?"

"'Cos he looked like one an' 'e spoke like one. You aren't arter him, Mr. Service, be you?"

"What did he say?" demanded the Inspector.

"Oh, 'e on'y asked the conductor if he were goin' to 'Orsham."

"Tall man?"

"He were that. Tall as you be, Mr. Service."

"I'll have to follow," whispered Service to his companions as they turned away. "Let's see. The 'bus'll be nearing Partridge Green. Too late to have it stopped there. I'll get on the 'phone, anyhow. Then I must get hold of a car. What about you?"

"I think we'll get back to Stanmead," said Ravenhill. "I've a 'story' to get off."

The Inspector looked at him keenly.

"Besides," Ravenhill continued, "there's—" And then he stopped and a queer look came into his face. "You'd better hurry, Inspector," he suggested. "That 'bus isn't standing still, you know."

Service hesitated, evidently puzzled by the reporter's manner. Then:

"Well, so long," he said, and went across the road to the post office.

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Ravenhill watched him go; then he turned to his companion.

"Manning," he said quietly, "what are you doing with that clerical hat?"

Guiltily Tom looked down. His uncle's hat had worked partly out of his breast pocket and showed above the roll collar of his coat.

"Was that what you picked up when you dropped your cigarette case?" demanded Ravenhill. "I wondered what it was." His face looked grave. "Do you know, Manning," he said, "that Winter said he saw the Rector prowling about the grounds last night?"

"Winter did?" faltered Tom.

"When he found the French window open he went outside. The moon was nearly full. He decided to take a turn round the garden. . . . Here, let's get along. We're attracting attention."

He seized his companion's arm and started to walk him the way they had come. Outside the village and in the shelter of the wood he stopped and lit his pipe.

"There were a surprising number of people prowling about last night," he said. "There was Winter. He reported having seen the Rector going along the drive away from the house—and hatless. There was Miss Wharton. There was Wharton himself. There was Starr, the butler. And, unless I'm a very poor 'crime merchant' there was the man who shot Winter and another who crouched in the bushes. There was rain yesterday, and the tracks of the last two are plain enough."

He started to walk on again. Tom, his heart pounding, fell into step.

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"I know practically nothing," Tom said presently.

"Well, here's a rough *resumé*," said Ravenhill. "Wharton has confessed that he quarreled with his wife about Winter at about eleven-fifteen. At first he said nothing of taking her by the throat. He said he went to bed but could not sleep and that at twelve-thirty remorse for the quarrel made him go to her room. Just before he had heard a sound but had attached no importance to it. He got to her room and found her asleep, as he assumed. When he left the room he saw Starr, the butler, in the passage with an overcoat over his pyjamas. The man said he'd been aroused by a noise. They searched the house and found the French window open. Starr said that he'd shut it at eleven-thirty. They saw nothing else amiss, however, and went to bed. Afterwards when he was hard pressed, Wharton said that in the quarrel with his wife—she was in bed, by the way—he flew into a passion and seized her by the throat. When he left her he did not know that he had killed her, and even when he returned at twelve-thirty he did not realize that she was dead. He—"

"But surely he could have seen?"

Ravenhill drew hard at his pipe. "The murder isn't so clear as it seems," he said. "For one thing the doctor says that Mrs. Wharton died at two o'clock—two and a half hours after Wharton says he took her by the throat. For another, there are all those people in the grounds and house, prowling about—Miss Wharton, Starr, Winter, the Rector, the man who shot Winter and another unknown; and the queer thing is, Manning, they all seem to have been watching each other!"

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CHAPTER VI

THE HYPODERMIC SYRINGE

On the way back to Redlands Tom Manning told Ravenhill a good deal of what his uncle had revealed to him. But he did not mention the sprained hand. He was at pains to point out what time the Rector had returned and that Mrs. Wharton, according to the medical evidence, had been killed about two o'clock.

"Besides," he added, "Wharton has confessed."

As he said it, he remembered Margery. Somehow he had been talking of her father as being someone apart from her altogether. Supposing he were convicted—as he must be since he would undoubtedly plead guilty. To say that Margery would suffer terribly was bathos. Tom found that he was considering whom he would rather see convicted—his uncle or Margery's father. The choice was terrible. He sweated, torturing himself with such thoughts, as though what he preferred mattered either way. It seemed so callous, too, to consider the matter like that.

"You forget," Ravenhill pointed out quietly, "that Wharton says he killed her at about half-past eleven."

"Perhaps she didn't die at once." Tom licked his dry lips. "Or perhaps the doctor made a mistake."

"He's unlikely to in a matter like that," returned Ravenhill. "It's astounding how exact doctors can be in

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estimating the time of death—provided the body is found soon enough, of course."

Tom was silent. He felt very weary. Ravenhill seemed to notice it.

"Here, let's rest for a bit," he suggested, pointing to a fallen tree. "I'd like to talk, too."

They sat down, and Ravenhill re-lit his pipe.

"Wharton's confession complicates the case rather than makes it simple," he observed presently. "Listen. Winter asked Miss Wharton to go to the theatre at Worthing with him last night. She refused. There'd been a quarrel about something, I fancy—possibly in connection with Mrs. Wharton. Winter took Mrs. Wharton instead."

He sucked hard at his pipe. "I'm going to tell you the story as I pieced it together," he went on. "The Worthing theatre's a two-shows-a-night place, and the pair went to the first performance, leaving at nine o'clock. On the way back Winter, who was driving Wharton's car, stopped it in the shadow of Long Wood. That's the one that goes round the house, isn't it?"

"Yes; it makes a half circle."

"They were seen there in each other's arms."

"Who saw them?" demanded Tom.

"Rufus Spence."

"The poacher! I know him. But he's an out-and-out ruffian. He—"

"He had no reason to lie in this instance," observed Ravenhill mildly. "Moreover, by speaking about it he reveals that he was in that wood last night, probably poaching. He says he saw them about ten o'clock. The

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pair arrived at Redlands at half-past ten or thereabouts. Miss Wharton had gone to her room and Wharton was in his study. The pair had a supper of biscuits and cheese and wine in the dining room, and Starr gave them some coffee. Mrs. Wharton retired to her room about eleven o'clock, and soon Winter went to his. Starr locked up for the night. He says he heard sounds of quarreling in Mrs. Wharton's room—Wharton and Mrs. Wharton, for he recognized the voices—but, as he says, it was no business of his. We can guess what the quarrel was about—Winter. Wharton himself acknowledges that."

Ravenhill re-lit his pipe, which had gone out.

"When Wharton was first questioned he admitted quarreling with his wife. Then, he said, he went to his room. Some time after he heard a thud, but concluding that Starr was still locking up the house he took no notice. But he had cooled down now, and had begun to feel remorseful. He went to his wife's room, knocked and went inside and switched on the light. He spoke to her, but she appeared to be asleep and so, not wanting to disturb her, he switched off the light and went outside—where he found Starr in an overcoat over his pyjamas. He, himself, by the way, was in a dressing gown. Starr said he'd been aroused by a noise and was on a tour of inspection. Wharton went with him. Downstairs they found the French window of the drawing room open. They looked outside but saw no one, and so they locked the window and continued their search. Later they went to their rooms, Wharton satisfied that Starr had forgotten to close the French window when he shut up the house for the night."

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"Yes, but if Wharton afterwards confessed that he killed his wife then all that isn't true," protested Tom.

"I'm coming to that. It was when Inspector Service was questioning him about details that Wharton suddenly broke down and said that he'd been driven into a passion when he quarreled with his wife and seized her by the throat. He—"

"When Starr heard them quarreling?" Tom asked quickly.

"Yes. . . . The second occasion he had gone to her room he had found her dead."

"And Starr met him as he was coming out of her room?"

"Exactly. . . . Now, let's return to the French window. It was Miss Wharton, of course, who left it open when she left to go to London. She went that way because the bolts of the front door squeak, and because when the back door's locked the key is with Starr. Not very long after she went, Winter found he couldn't sleep and went down to retrieve a book which he'd left in the drawing room that afternoon. Finding the drawing room window open he went out to investigate. He thought he heard someone in the garden and made a search. The moon was nearly full, but he found no one there. Presently, however, he saw the Rector, hatless, come from the shadow of the house and make off down the drive."

Tom felt suddenly sick. "Go on," he whispered.

"He followed a little way; then he changed his mind and returned—to find the French window shut. It had been shut, of course, by Wharton and Starr. As we can

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understand, Winter was in a dilemma. Finally he decided to get into his room by climbing on to the garage roof and entering his own window."

"But was that the natural thing to do?" asked Tom.

"It's hard to say. After all, remember that, if Winter is speaking the truth, he knew nothing of what had happened inside the house, so that he did not realize that his act might seem suspicious. As a matter of fact, he made no bones about it, when he told his story—said frankly he'd got into the house that way. Anyhow, the next stage of the drama was when the parlormaid, Nancy Beamish—Mrs. Wharton hadn't a maid of her own—took tea into her mistress at seven o'clock."

"Very early, wasn't it?"

"Apparently they were early birds. Effect of having lived in India, I suppose. . . . She found Mrs. Wharton didn't answer her calls and when she touched her to try and waken her she—well, she bolted for Starr. Mrs. Wharton was dead, of course. What happened after that isn't important. What is important is the fact that Wharton says he left his wife about half-past eleven whereas the doctor says she died nearly three hours later. Also there are all those people wandering about the house and grounds when they ought to have been in bed. Now on top of that comes the attempted murder of Winter by an unknown person who has apparently not entered the case at all until now. Are the two crimes connected, or are they a coincidence?"

He rapped out the dottle from his pipe and stood up.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get a move on. I must telegraph another story through to *The Planet*."

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They had not far to go before they reached the edge of the wood overlooking Redlands—just in time to see an ambulance disappearing round the drive.

"Hullo!" commented Ravenhill. "They've taken Winter away." He jumped across the brook, and as he steadied himself on the other side he gave a gasp of astonishment and pointed to a bramble. A shred of cloth hung upon it.

"Here's a find!" he exclaimed exultantly. "But how did we miss it before? Too intent upon footprints, I suppose. We're worse than amateurs."

"But this isn't the spot where we crossed before," Tom pointed out. "That's lower down."

Ravenhill whistled. "You're right," he said. He carefully detached the piece of cloth from the bramble. It was of gray tweed.

"There's a footprint," exclaimed Tom, pointing below the bush. "And by jingo! It's pointing towards the house! This is the way the fellow entered the place."

But Ravenhill was apparently not listening. He went a few paces towards the house, bent down and picked up something from the grass. Tom jumped across the brook and joined him. The object that Ravenhill had found was a case in brown leather, a few inches long, shallow and narrow. Ravenhill pressed the catch, and the lid sprang open. Inside lay a small hypodermic syringe.

"The cloth is from a pocket," said Ravenhill, "and this fell out as the man walked on."

"Ravenhill!" ejaculated Tom, clutching his arm excitedly. "Winter's a doctor! The syringe must be his."

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Ravenhill shut the case and taking an old envelope from his pocket and extracting the letter it contained, put the case and the shred of cloth in its place. Then he returned the envelope to his breast pocket.

"This was dropped by the man who shot Winter," he observed. "Look at the footprint. It's the same as those we were following when we went to Daincey Green."

A cackle of laughter made them swing around.

"I bin watching that there cloth this last 'arf-hour," said a voice. "An' I see the case too."

Thompson, the lodge-keeper, stepped from behind the bole of an oak.

"I wasn't goin' fer to leave un till someone come," he leered. "I knows a lot, I do. They do say as 'ow parson suffers from nooralgia somethin' chronic and takes drugs, 'ee do."

"Liar!" burst out Tom, taking a step towards the man.

Ravenhill grabbed at his arm and held him back.

"Ain't that thing wot they uses fer drugs?" asked Thompson, grinning evilly.

"How do you know what it is?" demanded Ravenhill.

The fellow looked disconcerted.

"That means you had a look at it before we arrived," commented Ravenhill grimly. "You'll have to explain that to the Inspector."

"Oh, me an' the Inspector gets on all right," cackled Thompson. "I knows a lot, I do, and Mr. Inspector Service knows it, that 'ee do. But I ain't tellin' no one. I knows 'ow to keep a still tongue in me 'ead."

"It wants cutting out," said Tom angrily.

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"You jest mind yer manners, my young toff," scowled Thompson. "If you wants to know something that I know go and ask that parson o' yourn what—"

With an oath Tom wrenched himself free and sprang at the lodge-keeper. The man stepped back and fell onto a bramble. Then, swearing horribly, he got on to his feet.

"You'll pay fer that, you —" he muttered.

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CHAPTER VII

THE MYSTERIOUS VISITOR

On a seat on the lawn Ravenhill told the story of his "find" to Inspector Service, while Tom Manning sat on the other side of the reporter in gloomy silence. Service's chase after the fugitive had been fruitless—as far as immediate results were concerned. Apparently the unknown had left the Horsham 'bus just beyond Partridge Green, and all trace of him had been lost. It was useless to search for a man of whom the Inspector knew only that he was tall.

"That fellow Thompson's a confounded nuisance," he commented at the end.

"Is that all?" asked Tom. "He seems a sinister fellow to me."

"He's a busybody," said the Inspector. "But he's got eyes like a hawk's. He doesn't miss anything."

"He's got a diseased imagination," commented Tom bitterly.

The Inspector looked at him shrewdly. "He doesn't like the Rector," he observed. "He's an atheist, you see."

"Is that the only reason?" asked Ravenhill.

The Inspector shrugged his shoulders. "As like as not," he answered. "But we needn't bother about him, though with eyes such as he's got he's a useful man sometimes."

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The sound of wheels on gravel came to Tom. He looked round and saw the station fly in the drive.

"A visitor," he announced.

Neither the Inspector nor Ravenhill moved. "Who is it?" demanded the policeman.

"Whom are you expecting, Inspector?" asked Ravenhill.

Tom saw a man alight from the fly. "I can't recognize him," he said. "It's a stranger. Have a look at him. He's not facing this way."

The Inspector glanced over his shoulder. Ravenhill turned right round. The stranger was paying the driver of the fly. Now he looked up at the house and mounted the steps. He pulled the bell, and the jangle of it came across the lawn. Then he turned round and surveyed the grounds. Apparently catching sight of the watchers, he abruptly swung round to the door and pulled the bell again.

The door was opened. Tom saw the figure of the butler in the gloom of the hall. The stranger walked inside, and the door was closed.

"I think we ought to be in this scene," said the Inspector. "Wonder who he is. Looks distinguished."

"His face is familiar somehow," Ravenhill said, frowning.

The Inspector got up and sauntered towards the house. He passed round it, evidently with the intention of entering from the back.

Ravenhill stood up. "I want to show you something, Manning," he observed. "You remember I said there were two people I couldn't name in the garden last

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night? Just come over here. We'll get behind this yew hedge, then we shan't be seen from the house."

He led the way through a tunnel in the dense wall of yew to the flower-garden beyond; then keeping close to the hedge he followed it round from the far side of the lawn to the flank that continued to the side of the house nearest West Billington. Almost at the end and not a dozen yards from the house he stopped. Here the yew hedge thinned out and ended in a syringa bush.

"Carefully," murmured Ravenhill, halting Tom by taking his arm. "Look." He pointed down at the turf. Two deep impressions showed plainly.

"Heel prints," said Ravenhill. "Someone was squatting on his hunkers and looking up at the house through that gap—looking up at Mrs. Wharton's window, in fact. . . . Now come over here."

Tom followed him to an old quince tree against which was a short length of lead pipe and a water tap. Water dripped from it steadily.

"Whoever it was watching here last night blundered against that tap as he made for the garden gate over there. See how the pipe's bent. It made him stagger into that flower-bed there. See the footprints? His shoes were wet from the ground under the tap."

Tom was not very impressed by the nature of his friend's discovery. Suddenly, however, he uttered an exclamation.

"Why, these are the same footprints as those we followed this morning."

"I think you're right. When I first saw those footprints where I picked up the pistol I was sure they were

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