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THE MERIWETHER MYSTERY

KAY CLEAVER STRAHAN

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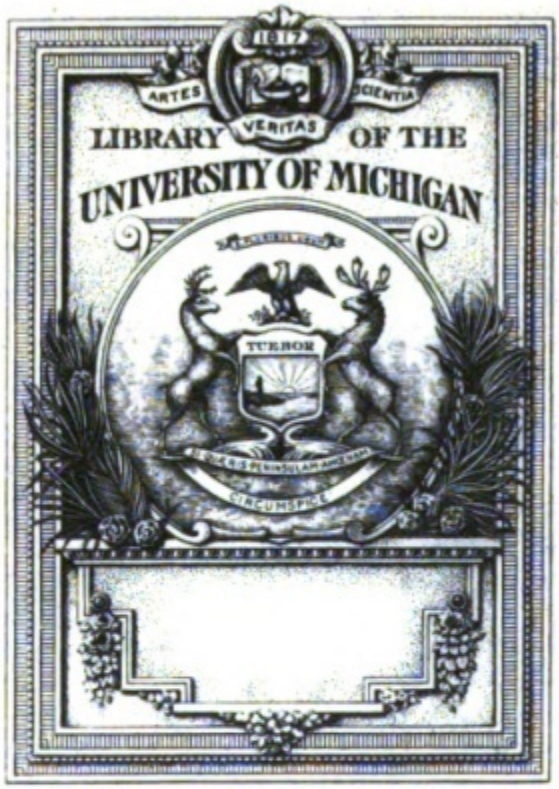

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KAY CLEAVER STRAHAN,

whose brilliant detective novel, FOOTPRINTS, was a success with critics and a best-seller with readers everywhere, writes in THE MERIWETHER MYSTERY a novel of detection so urbane, baffling, exciting and filled with wise humor, that it rivals even FOOTPRINTS in its appeal.

You will like the people in the little town of Satoria-by-the-Bay; you will be appalled with them at the first inexplicable murder—you will live with them through the hours of terror that followed the second killing—while Lynn MacDonald, the feminine detective whose amazing skill made FOOTPRINTS memorable, draws her net closer and closer around the murderer whom even the most astute reader will hardly identify before the end of the book.

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BOOKS BY

KAY CLEAVER STRAHAN

THE MERIWETHER MYSTERY

OCTOBER HOUSE

OH HAPPY YOUTH

DEATH TRAPS

FOOTPRINTS

THE DESERT MOON MYSTERY

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KAY CLEAVER STRAHAN

THE MERIWETHER MYSTERY

Who stooped and kissed the dead man . . . why was there a knife found in the yard if a pistol was thrown from a window . . . why bother to smash a xylophone to bits . . .? In quiet little Satoria-by-the-Bay, killing was a novelty, but Lynn MacDonald, crime investigator, found that even there the pattern of murder was as terrifying and complex as in a great city . . . This is the new mystery by the author of "Footprints" and "October House."

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FIRST EDITION

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C. F. BUTLER
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CHAPTER 1

SCARED? Scared! After the last policeman had finally taken himself out of the house, though I was dimly conscious of the fact that it was I, Cadwallader Van Garter, sitting there looking out of the window into the shivering fog-filled dawn, if someone had come up insisting that I was little Red Riding Hood on the verge of remarking "What big teeth you have, Grandma," I am sure I should have assented, not wishing to seem either eccentric or stubborn about it. Everything that had been a part of the Cadwallader I had known intimately for sixty-odd years was off elsewhere —oozed out, maybe, in clammy sickening sweat—and the object that remained in Helene Bailey's dining room was a balloon-like, floating, dizzy affair inflated to the bursting point with fear.

I might mention in passing that cowardice has never been noted as an outstanding characteristic of the Van Garter family. Going back from the present time to the day old Hendrik stood on the walls of Alkmaar and hurled his burning hoops, I haven't discovered a Van Garter who needed anything other than some reasonably solid object of which to be afraid—a Spanish cannon, an Indian tomahawk, a German machine gun—in order to get his Dutch blood up and start

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him giving a mighty good imitation of bravery. I am making no bid for a family record of heroes. More than likely they have been merely hot-headed fighting men; but striding through the years they have seemed to face the music even when Death was calling the tune.

Death had visited us there in the night, and though I did not know it then, Death was coming again and soon to visit us and to kill; but this was not what was ailing me that morning. I wasn't afraid of death. No man who is worth his salt and who has put through more than three score years of moderately decent living is afraid of death—or, for the matter of that, of its dealers. At the moment, could I have been confident that the murderer was coiled under the table, I should have known peace. I wasn't even afraid that my niece, Vicky, who had gone to her room an hour since was going to be found murdered within the next few minutes. Had I possessed better gumption I might have been afraid of this, but I was not. No, my trouble was that for the first time in my life I was afraid of life, and the reason for my fear could not be faced. I do not mean that it was lurking about and that I was refusing to face it. I mean that some time during the horrors of the preceding night it must have presented itself to me and that I had refused it so violently that it had vanished. It was gone; and along with it as I have mentioned before had gone the thinking, reasoning being of one Cadwallader Van Garter, leaving a specimen most ridiculous on the face

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of our good green earth—an elderly fat man frightened senseless at nothing whatever.

If Paul Keasy, who happened to come into the dining room just then, had not been head over heels in love with Vicky—or with Vicky's money, which amounts to the same thing, I guess, with fellows of his sort—there would have been more of mirth and less of pity in the wan smile with which he favored me before he remarked, with the English accent that he attempts because he has never been far beyond the boundaries of his native Oregon, "Ah, there, Mr. Van Garter. Nasty business this. What?"

He picked up a chair and turned it around in order to straddle it when he sat down—a provoking gesture of affectation used by mollycoddles eager to prove their masculinity. "I think," he went on, "that we men, by Jove, should be doing something about it—if you see what I mean."

I tried closing my mouth and found it would close. So I tried opening it again, and to my satisfaction I heard it reply, "Page Sherlock Holmes, or Malengrin."

Since I am without education it is my habit on any occasion to show off what small scraps of erudition I have stolen for myself since I was kicked out of college more than forty years ago for attempting to give an animated portrayal of a rich man's son. My father—God bless him—not caring for the exhibition, invited me to see what I could do with the depiction of a poor man's son and stopped my allowance for a year.

At the end of the year I was so busy helping Grover

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Cleveland with the Apache Indians out in Texas that I forgot to return to the halls of classic learning. During the following four years I was—well, to abridge and expurgate—doing other things which I found more interesting and which I still think, perhaps, were more profitable ultimately than Greek verbs to a young scallawag such as I.

In 1891, when I'd got the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway off my hands (I'd bossed the sweetest gang of Chinese in the outfit) I held a straight flush one night in a place where I shouldn't have been, and I took my lawless profits and went home to visit the folks. But I found Boston cramping and confining; so I came out West again, bearing no paternal blessing, leaving no maternal broken heart behind me. Mother willingly would have been broken-hearted had she thought of it; but she chanced to be busy in Europe that winter trying her pretty best to get my sister Harriet married to a prince, a duke, or an earl. Father was never a hand for blessings, and he was afraid to let down the bars for fear I'd see that he was tickled to death at my continued resolution to make a success on my own. I left him swearing soft, neat Unitarian oaths that he would cut me off without a penny. In the end he bequeathed me half his fortune (which I didn't need and have never needed, thanks to a couple of gold mines in the Yukon; I'd probably be a smarter and better man today had he left it elsewhere), and I shed hot tears that froze into a fringe of icicles on my dirty, stubbly chin when I read the

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lawyer's letter, and went and got fool drunk that night in Dawson for the last time in my life.

Which mention of fools, in a roundabout way I'll admit, may serve to return us to Helene Bailey's dining room and the conversation begun between that young sap Paul Keasy and myself.

Said he, "Malengrin?"

"You'll recall he went about with a net to catch fools."

"You mean the police officers—detectives?" he questioned.

"Necessarily." I had been thinking exclusively of myself but I did not choose so to inform him.

"They didn't,"—he offered me a cigarette which I refused—"seem to get hold, quite; did they?"

I filled my pipe and asked, "Was anything more found out in the yard?"

"No. Nothing. No footprints—clues, nothing. But that carving knife, now? The pistol—of course. You know, the more I think of it the more extraordinary that carving knife just there, outside the living room windows . . . Absolutely extraordinary, if you know what I mean?"

I lighted my pipe. Through its first cloud of smoke I noticed that Paul Keasy was looking at me in a peculiar manner. "There is an expression," thought I, "for the sly, squint-eyed observation he is devising. Ah," thought I, "the gentleman is 'eyeing me narrowly,'" and I puffed again and greeted the semblance at least of old Cadwallader, suddenly returned, and

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him I had overlooked the fidgety feminine side of his character and had done him too much credit. However, in the interests of fairness I should say that Vicky from the first insisted that I was "all wet" concerning Paul. She defined him as a poor kid with a loving mother and an inferiority complex (what girls found, while Œdipus was still a myth and not a modern necessity and before the invention of complexes, to pity in conceited young jackanapes I cannot now remember) who might have been all right anyway if he hadn't had long eyelashes and been hopelessly handsome.

His handsomeness was damaged this morning from nerve strain and lack of sleep; but as I sat and puffed my pipe and listened to him thanking his feeble fortune that his mother was away vacationing, and inquiring as to the state of Vicky's health, mind, and emotions, I found him an excellent counter-irritant. It seemed to me, mistakenly as I shall later explain, that he was giving me the reason for my fear and that resolved it amounted to a certainty that all of us there in Meriwether were soon to discover ourselves in hot water up to our necks and stewing. From here it was but a step to a conclusion: none of us was going to enjoy this situation and, in consequence, the sooner we got someone other and more able than the local police authorities on the job of extricating us from it the better.

My first inclination was to call my attorney in Portland and tell him to come immediately to Satoria-by-

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the-Bay. But it occurred to me that this might look none too well, this engaging an attorney before anyone had so much as hinted that the innocence of me and mine was less than that of lambs and angels. No, I reflected, zeal and not premature timidity was the spirit to manifest; zeal for the unearthing of the villain—zeal impersonal, altruistic, engendered solely by outraged moral instincts and abstract desire for justice.

For ten minutes or more after Paul Keasy had gone about his piffling ways I sat alone, considering. Then I went into the hall, took up the telephone, and succeeded readily, since it was then about six o'clock in the morning, in getting a call through to Lynn MacDonald at her home in San Francisco.

After I had informed her who I was and where and why and what about it, I told her that if she would hop a plane—buy one if necessary—and get up here to us in Meriwether, Satoria-by-the-Bay, Oregon, without stopping for breakfast she could name her own terms when she arrived here.

She smiled (I am getting slightly deaf, but I am not so deaf as yet that I cannot hear a pretty woman smile over the telephone) and said that she would come at once. And I, inborn imbecile that I was, felt enormously relieved and went all but prancing up the stairs to impart the news of my cleverness to Vicky and to receive becomingly her admiration.

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CHAPTER 2

MY CONTENTION is that every man who is worth the powder to blow him elsewhere has one comfortable soft spot in his brain isolated as a refuge for his pet insanity. When I meet a man I begin prospecting for his soft spot, and if I can't find one from antiques to Zionism, including babies, dogs, and diseases (his own), morality (the other fellow's), duck-hunting, the Spanish language, diet, golf, or goldfish,I give him up right there as being no excellent soul. My own mania at the time of the Meriwether murders had continued along steadily with increasing intensity and no relapses for twenty-two years, bearing the name of Victoria Van Garter.

Vicky is my young brother Henry's little daughter. When Mother was on her quest for princes, dukes, and earls, Harriet spoiled it all by falling in love with the son of a mere knight, Sir Bodley Crowinshank, and marrying him. Well, you know how families are. The Van Garters got chummy with the Crowinshanks, and in time my brother Henry married the youngest Crowinshank girl, whose name was Muriel Violet Victoria, and brought her home to live in Boston. Vicky was born there. I was her godfather at the christening. Henry was killed at Château-Thierry. Muriel, bless her gentle ways, died of influenza less than a year after Henry's death, and I became Vicky's guardian and the trustee of her fortune.

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From that time to this Vicky had done her best to take good care of me, to educate me, to set my feet in seemly paths, to rear me as all right-minded obese old bachelors should wish to be reared. True, her discipline at times has been fairly rigid; but she is the only woman who has ever meant it when she called me "darling." I have never suggested going on a reducing diet or régime but what she has pooh-poohed the idea and assured me that I was perfect as I was. I have never experimented with hair tonics but that, within the first few days, Vicky's soft brown eyes have been able to discern hair sprouting on my shining scalp as thickly as spring corn in a fertile Iowa field.

Later I shall hope to find time to explain why Vicky, at the time of the murders, was living not in any one of our several homes on the Pacific Coast but in a boarding house in the small town of Satoria-by-the-Bay. Just now I know that my portly person has taken too long to go up the stairs, after the telephone conversation with Lynn MacDonald, and down the hall past the shuddering sight of the third door, closed and padlocked, on the left of the passage to my niece's room.

I knocked. Vicky flung the door open. She had taken off the frock she had worn the evening before and had donned some lounging pajamas, soft yellow silky things that cunningly flattered her slender frailty. She took hold of my coat lapels and pulled me into her room. She closed the door behind us with a quick kick of her small satin-clad foot. She said, "I thought you

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were never coming! Where have you been? How could you stay away so long? We have to talk things over. We have to get things straight in our own minds. We have to know exactly what we are going to say. I have worked a horary chart. The person will be discovered by means of a small round object. We have to find it. We have to think—plan——"

"No," I interrupted firmly, "we don't. I have engaged someone, an expert, to take over that job of thinking and worrying for us."

"Oh, yeah?" said Vicky. But her voice, accustomed as it was to the formation of sweet graceful sentences, could do nothing effective in the vulgate, so I remained unwarned. I think I smiled as I answered, "Lynn MacDonald. I got her just now over long-distance. She is coming at once, by plane."

"Good grief!" said Vicky, and looked at me as mothers look at the least favored of their offspring when he comes into the house after licking the kid next door in the vicinity of a mud puddle. The reproach, the astonishment bordering repulsion I might have endured had they been unaccompanied by the gentle compassion afforded senility.

"That is all very well, young woman," said I. "But this MacDonald person happens to be the keenest crime analyst on the coast, and some think her the best in the country."

"I know," said Vicky. "Dear heaven, what in the world made you think of—well, just that one thing to

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do?" She sighed, which is not her habit, and held out her hand and, "Give me a quarter," she said.

"You act," I complained, "as if you had caught me putting beans up my nose," and I passed her the coin.

"Heads or tails?" she inquired.

"Heads," said I.

She examined the bit of money on her wrist. "It's heads," said she. "I'll hang."

"Hang what?" I asked, with vague thoughts of suspended opinions, delayed decisions, abstractions of the sort.

"By the neck," said she. "That is, unless you'll run downstairs as fast as you can go and tell that woman you've changed your mind and don't want her coming here."

Oddly, when Vicky finished speaking I found myself aware of mental relief, as if far out on the edges of my consciousness things were beginning to make sense. It seemed to me that the reason for my horrible fear was at least approaching in the fact that Vicky was in danger of being accused of committing the crime. So far I could go. So far I did go and no farther, and it was not far enough. Fat old fool that I was, I suppose I grinned. I had my antagonist, had I not? Something to fight, something to get my false teeth into and bite on?

"Of course," said Vicky, "if this is your idea of humor——But it isn't sweet of you. I shouldn't have smiled if it had turned up tails and you were going to hang. I'd have cried and cried like anything."

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"Vick," said I, "now see here, I've had enough of this——"

"So have I," she interrupted. "All right. I hate to be mean, but I tell you if you don't stop that woman's coming up here I'll confess. The police, I think, had decided to be—baffled; that's the word, isn't it? They knew that one of us was guilty. But they hate like fury making mistakes with philanthropists who strew the state with drinking fountains and parks and roads. They'd dislike making mistakes with the philanthropist's only niece. So they were going to be baffled. Lynn MacDonald won't be. So I think I'll get dressed and go right down to the jail, or wherever I should go, and tell them that I did it, just to get it off my mind. I'd much rather, if you don't care, than to sneak and lie and be found out, anyway, in the end. I couldn't go through another night like last night. I'd thought that the worst was over. But now . . . Yes, it would be a big relief just to confess."

"Victoria," said I, "let me get this straight. You——You——" Naturally, decently, I could not frame the question.

"Did it?" she finished for me. "Surely. Of course. I thought that you—understood. Of course I did it. Who else?"

"I'll go," I said, "and tell her not to come."

I went and fell down the stairs.

I use the word "fell" for clarity and convenience. Actually, I did not fall down the stairs. "Bounced" would be more accurately descriptive of my move-

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ments, but for the fact that it seems to assume an element of personal volition that was wholly lacking. "Was bounced" comes nearer yet to the truth; though particularly in tales of mystery one should hesitate before what might appear an arrogation of the supernatural. The entire performance was one of unbelievable rapidity; but, to the best of my memory, what happened was that on the second step from the top I left the stairs, assumed a rectangular position, and proceeded swiftly on my way by means of describing a wide arc after each fourth or fifth step which I touched fleetingly in passing. I recall no attempt on my part to stay my progress. My mind was occupied with more seriously important affairs. I was going to the telephone; unconventionally, perhaps with an appearance of capriciousness—but going I was, approaching my destination. When the steps gave out I brought up, still maintaining the rectangular position, on the hard floor of the lower hall, and I sat there flat to greet Evadne Parnham who came hurrying, though timidly, from the living room and looked at me. I myself have looked at the more objectionably amusing animals in the zoo with the same expression.

"Gee!" said she. "I thought it was an earthquake. What did you do, fall or something?"

"Not at all," said I. "I am all right, thank you. Don't let me detain you."

She advanced a cautious step or two. "It sounded like an earthquake," she insisted, and began suddenly to giggle and kept at it, searching for a handkerchief.

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"You look awfully funny," she explained, "and I'll bet you looked funnier falling down stairs. There's something awfully funny, I always think, about fat men falling down stairs. I've a strong sense of 'umor. You'll have to excuse me. I'm awfully nervous, too, after last night. It's the way your legs stick out so straight when your face looks so dignified. Why don't you get up?"

I took hold of the newel post and pulled myself to my feet. I was none too soon about it, for in the next moment Sarah Parnham came into the hall from the dining room.

CHAPTER 3

DESPITE the fact that Sarah Parnham was as thin as a bone and had a parrot's nose I had always, though disliking her personality, respected her as a worthy, intelligent lady and an able educator of the young. In turn, I thought that she gave me an honest dislike and a genuine respect, either of which I should have been unwilling to forfeit because of an absurdity of attitude.

Justice, I felt, had always been freely exchanged between Sarah Parnham and me. She knew that my mania was Vicky, of whom she disapproved relentlessly on every count and charm. I knew that her mania was her stepmother, Evadne Parnham, in my

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opinion the most objectionable scrap of bleached-blonde femininity that ever littered land or sea. But we, Sarah Parnham and I, had simply scored these manias of ours off, one against the other—pegleg and patch-eye as it were—and had politely ignored them.

Sarah Parnham was considerably older than her stepmother. She would have been well past her girlhood when Dr. Parnham, in his dotage, found this very blonde, blue-eyed Evadne wench playing juvenile parts in a third-rate road show and married her and brought her home to run through his modest fortune and, I firmly believe, irritate him to death within two years.

During the twenty years since the doctor's death Sarah Parnham had advanced steadily in her profession of teaching, had come on from her first position in a rural school to an assistant principalship in a small private progressive school in Satoria-by-the-Bay. She had held this place for six years; but at the time of the Meriwether tragedies she had resigned it—chiefly, I had been told, because of Evadne Parnham's constant, fretting discontent with the tiny town—and, bravely ambitious, was seeking a better post either in a small college or city school.

I suppose no attitude of Vicky's has ever been more annoying to me than the one she took concerning these two ladies. Despite the fact that Evadne spent her days and her years dawdling in boarding-house rooms, beautifying herself, gossiping, cheating herself at solitaire, playing—if you please!—a xylophone and play-

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ing it wretchedly, Vicky insisted that Sarah had all the best of the relationship. Evadne Parnham, Vicky said, gave Sarah Parnham a reason for work and a reason for life, whereas Sarah Parnham gave her stepmother only support and petting and silly adoration. "Evadne prods," said Vicky, "but Sarah smothers." And when I reminded Vicky that for this support and adoration Evadne returned fault-finding, disloyalty—her very nickname for Sarah, "Sassy," was so inappropriate that it was mockery and impudence—Vicky remarked that it was a grand thing for a grimly homely woman in her fifties to have a person who would call her "Sassy." Vicky, of course, calls me "Candy" at times because she says it is impossible to find an attractive nickname for Cadwallader. Well, well, no matter. Sarah Parnham had just come into the lower hall, I believe.

Evadne Parnham promptly turned her back and buried her face in her handkerchief and her shoulders shook. "The lady," thought I, "is a humbug. Not wishing to be caught giggling she is simulating tears." But I held my peace despite the malevolent glances which Sarah, who now had Evadne in her arms, was directing at me across the quivering shoulders.

" 'Snerves," Evadne finally answered Sarah's insistent questions. "I'm just awfully upset. I can't bear it—realize it. Whenever I think I get nervous. I just cry and cry. I'm awfully upset."

"Now, now, honey," Sarah protested, "everything is going to be all right. Mr. Van Garter has engaged

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that Lynn MacDonald to come straight up here to Meriwether by airplane. I was thinking, dear, that she'll be glad to have you help her. You'll like helping a famous detective, won't you?"

(This question of Sarah Parnham's requires, perhaps, a few words of explanation. Evadne Parnham had once confided to Vicky and me that her one ambition was to become a detective. When Vicky answered, "Why don't you?" Evadne shrugged it away with, "Sassy wouldn't like it. Poor old Sassy isn't interested in crime, nor anything thrilling. Not even men. Just her old pupils and intelligence ratings. She'd hate to have me work. I'm not very strong. I don't mind—much. I have my music—it means a lot to me.")

Sarah Parnham repeated, "You'll like helping a famous detective, won't you? I shouldn't be surprised if you beat her at her own game and discovered the criminal all by yourself."

"No, I won't." Evadne's thin voice came muffled from Sarah's shoulder. "I'm too nervous. I don't want to discover the criminal. I don't want anybody to. I wish she weren't coming. I hope he gets away."

"Don't say such things," Sarah permitted herself a slight sternness. "You don't mean them. It is a wonderful thing to have her coming, and you are glad—as we all are. Mr. Keasy heard you telephoning, Mr. Van Garter. Helene is most grateful. We both say that if such a terrible thing had to happen, how fortunate it is for us that you should be here visiting. How soon do you think Miss MacDonald will arrive?"

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The telephone, which but a moment before had been but an arm's length away from me, was now rapidly receding; was, in fact, approximately as far away as heaven. And yet, Joseph saw a ladder; Elijah went up by a whirlwind; and Cadwallader maintained breath in his body.

"I am glad, indeed, to hear that you approve of her engagement on the case," said I. "Upon my word, I had been fearing that I acted prematurely when I telephoned for her without consulting with any of you. You understand my point? This is, of course, a delicate situation——"

"It takes a more subtle perception than mine," retorted Sarah Parnham, "to perceive delicacy in cold-blooded murder."

"I was not," said I, "referring to the murder—the deed. I was thinking of the situation in which those of us who were presumably in the house at the time now find ourselves."

"Since I was not in the house at the time," said Sarah Parnham, "I can have no opinion on that subject."

"And you, Mrs. Parnham?" I questioned.

She had regained her composure and had, for the past minute or two, been fixing me with a conspirator's gaze which I had feared was to terminate in a wink; but she had not followed our conversation.

"And I—what?" said she.

"It doesn't matter," Sarah assured her. "I've made

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coffee in the kitchen. Run get yourself a cup, dear. It will help your nerves."

When she had left us I feared that perhaps Sarah Parnharm, too, had failed to keep pace, so I attempted a clumsy pointing. "Perhaps," I suggested, "when you have had time to talk the matter over more carefully with Mrs. Parnham you may feel better qualified to express an opinion?"

"Possibly," said she, and looked straight at me for a moment with her clear hazel eyes before she sent them up the stairway. I watched them climbing step by step up and up to the second floor hallway, and down it past the shut and padlocked door straight along and actually into Vicky's room.

The measure of distance to the telephone changed. It was no longer as far away as heaven; it was as close as the infernal regions—to touch it might be danger, death, and damnation.

Said I, "Yes, you are right. It was Victoria who persuaded me, frankly against my better judgment, to telephone at once for Lynn MacDonald. But for my niece's urging I should have gone more fully into the plan with those who—er——"

My pause was not appreciable, but Sarah Parnham snatched it. "Those who are under suspicion?"

"Those who are concerned," said I.

"Not at all," said she. "I can assure you that if you and Miss Van Garter wish to engage a criminologist, no one else in Meriwether could possibly object."

"That greatly relieves my mind," said I. "And I

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am delighted at having Victoria's opinion so ably, so sensibly confirmed."

"Fiddlesticks!" said she; a word which, though perhaps preferable to its modern equivalent, "Boloney," should be strictly tabooed by ladies who are prudent of their charms.

She quitted the hall and went into the dining room. I stood leaning against the newel post for the artless reason that I could think of nothing else to do. She spoke my name, and I jumped the width of the rug.

"I am sorry I startled you," she said. "I came back because I have something I wish to say to you. I lost my temper just now. I'm sorry."

"Dear lady——" I began, forgetting momentarily that Vicky declares me microbic when I say "dear lady."

Apparently Sarah Parnham agreed with Vicky. "Don't 'dear lady' me," she snapped. "When you aren't trying to be a gentleman of the old school you are a real person, worth bothering with—almost. What I started to say was that your insinuations about my stepmother made me lose my temper and talk foolishly. I know that neither you nor Miss Van Garter committed the murder——"

"If, after all, it was murder——" I attempted, but she shook that away with a toss of her head and went on:

"I have no reason for knowing that neither of you did it. Appearances are much against one or the other of you. But, illogically, unreasonably—I do know that

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you are both innocent. Now in return for this assurance of mine will you give me your assurance that you know Evadne had nothing to do with this terrible affair—nothing in any way?"

"Miss Parnham," said I, "as a gentleman of the old school I give you that assurance fully and freely. But," I continued, "as a person almost worth bothering with, I am bound to say that I am as yet reserving all my opinions."

She bit at her lip and pressed her dark hair back from her high, bulging forehead, revealing a lock of gray which she usually tried, though ineffectually, to keep hidden. "In other words," she said, at last, "you'd be unwilling to state, right now, that you, yourself, did not commit the murder?"

I fear I only gaped at her stupidly.

"I understand," she went on. "I am forced to. I don't even blame you, though I may envy you. You were here at home all evening. I was downtown at that miserable moving picture show with Helene. You intend to sacrifice truth, or Evadne, or anything or anyone else, if necessary, to keep Miss Van Garter clear of this affair. In extremity you plan now to step up and shoulder the blame yourself. I know. I'd do the same thing for Evadne if I could. I can't. So I seem helpless, useless—as yet. But I have a mind, Mr. Van Garter—it has been called exceptional—and I can use it. If that is conceit, well and good. It is my one vanity. We are in serious trouble here. You care only for your 'Vicky.' I care only, I suppose, for Evadne—

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though I should like to help Helene and Dot, if I could. You and I both know, Mr. Van Garter, that Evadne and Miss Van Garter are innocent. The trouble is—will the others know this? The detective who is coming? I am honestly glad that you sent for her. But I am honestly fearful, too. It seems to me that you and I might much better be allies in this than antagonists."

"Much better," I agreed, and extended my hand to her and marveled that her bony fingers could communicate such softening comfort. What was it the lady had said? "In extremity you plan now to step in and shoulder the blame yourself."

Observe, then, for an instant before we leave him, Cadwallader the hero; Cadwallader with the great imagination proper to mad men leaping for the gallows as a dog leaps for a bone; Cadwallader gone sacrificial; Cadwallader supreme!

CHAPTER 4

THE discerning, penetrating reader—and no other takes up a tale of this type—will have recognized long ere this that the thing which was shaking me senseless with fear early that August morning, the horror I could not face was not the fact that Vicky or I would be accused of the murder. No. It was the strong pos-

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sibility, approaching certainty, that Vicky herself had actually done the shooting.

If this same reader has not been skipping impatiently—or resignedly—from peak to peak of my paragraphs because of an understandable and wholly pardonable desire to find the corpse in the story, he will have noticed the restrained and objective manner with which I treated my own emotions and mental processes at the time when Vicky, with her terrible confession, dragged my fear before me and compelled me to face it fair and square. But if the reader, still the same, has, as I hope, a touch of what in my day was called sentiment but is now more generally referred to as "hokum" or "hooey," he may have cast aside the story at this point and risen to wonder why the devil I believed her.

My apology and explanation will necessitate, alas, another short diversion. But the corpse and the clues I assure you are waiting only a little way along now in the narrative. They will be there—it is a promise—untouched when we arrive.

To begin, then, where all good stories should begin were all authors good authors, at the beginning, which, in this case, is some sixteen months previous to our horrible August night, in the moody month of April when Vicky had just put through to its end another unfortunate love affair.

Vicky, though she would deny it with violence, is a hyper-romanticist. She expects, in this day and age, to find a lad to whom the fact that she is an extraordi-

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narily wealthy girl accounts less than the dust in his young life. Now Vicky is susceptible; and Vicky has been loved, sincerely enough I think since she is wholly lovable, by many men: some honest, some scamps; some smart, some stupid; some gentlemen, some "moderns"; some one thing, some another, but no one of them all things. Sooner or later in each affair Vicky discovers that the young man does not consider her millions inconsequential; that he thinks the circumstance of her possessing them is at least faintly fortunate. Then and there ends Vicky's latest love adventure. As you perceive, Vicky will either wed a man steeped in duplicity, sharp and sly, or change her mind, or die an old maid. But this may not be a history of Vicky's romances since the murder, you know, must out.

This April affair of hers chanced to be one of her more ardent experiences. (The boy was a handsome young chauffeur of whom I highly approved.) A few days after the engagement said Vicky to Nicky, "Dearest, you aren't glad, you don't care in the least that I happen to have such rotten vulgar wads of money—do you—are you?"

"What difference," said Nicky to Vicky, "could money make, when I love you like I do?"

"Ah-h-h!" sighed Vicky in rapture.

"Ah-h-h!" sighed Nicky, undoubtedly rapturous also.

"I've a notion," said Vicky, "to give the whole pile to charity—a foundation for research into something

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or other, on our wedding day. Shall I do that, darling? You'd love me to do that, shouldn't you?"

"Well, now, kid," Nicky temporizes, "I don't know about all of it. You see, if I should get out of a job. There's insurance, and . . . "

I found her, by well-tried and often-used methods of my own, which I shall not describe here as I may need again to use them, three days later in Satoria-by-the Bay. She was wearing a simple Lelong frock and selling egg beaters and can openers in a five-and-ten-cent store. She was also, she informed me, living her own life—or making a life for herself, I can't remember which it was—far from the taint of her cursed money. I suggested Toulon and the General's family whom we had promised to visit. Vicky loved Toulon and the General, and there was one of the General's sons whom I hoped Vicky could love, some day, when she grew older and wiser. She twirled an egg beater and said we might go again to Toulon, if she could save the passage money from her salary.

She stayed in the red-and-white five-and-ten-cent store for two weeks and then she discovered a small tea room and antique shoppe for sale and she bought it, with the savings from her salary, I presume. The temptation to linger in Vicky's shoppe (her modernity insists that a spade be called a spade and sees nothing incongruous in calling a combination restaurant and junk store a "shoppe") is not strong, and there are other trails to tread. Suffice it to say that she had, she asserted, found happiness. She pictured herself as a

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useful member of society. She lived on her earnings, paying all her personal bills with the money taken in at the shoppe, and making up the deficit in the books each month from her own vulgar but convenient bank account.

At just about the time when she was becoming thoroughly tired of the whole business a fellow boarder of hers, an Oswald Fleep, fell in love with her and succeeded in interesting her, not in himself (Oswald seemed a fine little young man and I liked him, though he looked like his name and had sparse red hair, profuse freckles, and pale eyes) but in his mania, which was astrology. So Vicky bought books and a pencil sharpener; learned to make neatly curved moons, plump fours for Jupiter, arrows for Mars. She met my doubts with the moon and the tides. She blamed my questionings on the planets in my zodiac. She established confidential relationships with the constellations and visited round among the stars.

As an interest, with its attendant philosophy, I consider astrology preferable to many of the ologies and osophies that I have been invited to examine and forced to discard during the past fifty years. Nor have I anything at all against sun, moon, and stars, Aries, Libra, or Gemini, except their distance from the earth. Week-ending in the heavens, Vicky began to speak a new language. If I said to her, "I feel very dull today," Vicky would say to me, "Darling, of course you do. Transiting Saturn is opposing your third house Mercury. He'll be out of orb on Tuesday," and consider

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the subject ended. If I said to her, as indeed I did say, "I don't like this Antony Charvan," she would respond with a smile illimitably beautiful and sweet, "Poor Tony. Capricorn rising and Mars in the nadir squaring his sun with an afflicted moon, besides," and I never knew the answer.

Should the discriminating reader here remark that in my previously given passages I have presented Vicky with but slight astrological terminology and none of the philosophy I must explain that, at the time of the first murder in Meriwether, Vicky's passion for astrology was cooling after the manner of all Vicky's passions; and, too, during moments of extreme and sudden stress Vicky—alas or hurray, as you like—was prone to forget her philosophy, after the manner of many philosophers.

Indeed, early on the Saturday afternoon before the first murder, when I motored down from Portland to spend a few days with the child, I noted in her manner none of the gentle toleration which the study of astrology should, and perhaps sometimes does, engender.

This irritability of hers I attributed to the weather. It was hot, with the steamy, cloying, sneaking heat that sea-level locations occasionally attain. All along our coast from Seattle to San Francisco I know of nothing so disruptive of morale as a temperature above ninety. Instance the fact that on our drive from the city to Satoria-by-the-Bay my British chauffeur, Merkel by name, stopped the car and without apology or question removed his coat. I, while commending unre-

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servedly his common sense, was as dumbfounded as I should have been had one of my colleagues at the club risen in the library, put aside his *Literary Digest*, and completely disrobed. "After this," thought I, "the deluge?" And, since I thought interrogatively, echo should have answered, as all good fictional echoes used to answer (echoes, I understand, are now out of vogue along with *eau de Cologne*), "Ah, deluge indeed!" And any well-trained, dictionary-minded echo might well have gone on doing the letter "D"—"Death, disgrace, damage, dire destruction"—and brought up to a neat finish with "dunces and dunderheads."

For so we were—so, indubitably we were. Murder was done. Murder continued being done while we discredited all our senses and used none of them; dallied with the incredible when all we needed to do was to examine, briefly, the credible.

I am fully aware that one of the tricks of the mystery monger's trade is to assert, early in the narrative, that the solution of the problem should have been mere child's play—pigs in the clover for the village idiot. Someone—Chesterton, I believe, it sounds like him—has asserted that the whole endeavor of a mystery tale should be to make the reader feel stupid; as stupid as Watson. My contention is that to create a feeling of stupidity is impossible and undesirable. Hence, I shall not declare that the Meriwether mystery should have been solved at once and with ease. It is true that the merest molecule of intelligence, used by any one of us, should have directed our sus-

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picions instantly toward the culprit. The establishment of proof of the guilt was a gray horse of a different color. Indeed, despite other opinions, I am bound to insist that, but for the weather and its sticky heat, certain proof could not have been obtained. Vicky, however, contends as yet that the credit for the discovery of the murderer should be given to the stars and their cryptic message, "A small round object."

I have been informed, falsely I trust, that Miss MacDonald when questioned as to the part the science of astrology played in solving the Meriwether mystery and establishing the criminal's guilt, replied, simply, "Pooh."

Relayed to Vicky, the injustice of this retort provoked a bitter disputativeness. "'Now then'"—a wickedly successful mimicry of one of Miss MacDonald's speech mannerisms—"did we or did we not tell her to find a small round object? Did she find it? She did. And with it her old proof. Pooh for proof!" mocked Vicky, it would seem illogically, since proof was necessary, "Pooh. I tell you, Candy, if that woman were wearing red flannel undies—and she might, too—and she itched, she'd take the undies off and search them for San Francisco fleas before she'd be willing to state positively why she wanted to scratch. That woman and her proofs, and her 'Poohs!'"

"But my dear," said I, "I thought you liked Miss MacDonald?"

"What if I did?" demanded Vicky. "As Grandma Crowinshank used to say——"

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I intervened. Long experience has made me deft with thwarting the Lady Crowinshank's quotations.

CHAPTER 5

ODD how one postpones a murder. I got myself into the heat of the August afternoon riding in my car behind Merkel with his coat off, and there I again digressed, reluctant even after all these months to go on into the narration of the shocking event itself.

Rapidly, then, I arrived in Satoria-by-the-Bay and at the hotel, where I was forced to put up when visiting Vicky, since there was never an extra room available in Meriwether. I told Merkel to put the car in the garage—further contact with its thick perspiring plushes seemed intolerable—and, after outmaneuvering the shower bath and dressing in fresh clothing, I strolled slowly down the heat-shimmering streets to Vicky's shoppe. The place was tepid and gloomy, and her "Darling, so glad you came down" wilted from lack of emphasis.

In the past half-hour, apparently, she had found the word "sweat" in her vocabulary, and she appeared to derive a sullen satisfaction from the use of it. She was sweating—a palpable falsehood, she looked as cool as a dainty fern deep in a forest. Her soul and her mind were sweating; the very sun in the murky sky was sweating. Dot Bailey, the dumpy daughter of Vicky's

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charming landlady, Helene Bailey, had recently been in the shoppe. Dot had been dressed in a red-and-white rig, striped, said Vicky, like greasy bacon, and had eaten two French pastries with her fat fingers.

I was scandalized, and I said, "This won't do. It won't do at all. Now how about Banff or Norway? Later, perhaps, Toulon?"

"Not with my sun squaring Uranus," said she.

I confessed. "I had forgotten Uranus," said I.

"Forgotten Uranus!" she deplored, aghast.

"I remembered the sun," I offered humbly, but she ignored it, and, "It is my Aquarius moon, I suppose," she said, "that makes me feel things—sense things so disturbingly."

"Things?" I questioned, and prompted, "Such as?"

"I don't know," she said, "but fear seems a part of it and—well, hate."

"Ah," said I. "Who hates whom?"

"I don't know."

"Who, then, fears whom?"

"I wish," she said, wistfully, "that you'd stop who-ing and whom-ing."

"Where," I complied, "is this hating and fearing going on?"

"Meriwether. Though when Dot was in here just now she brought a load and left it. I think she is in love with Tony Charvan. She was talking dreadfully about him—spitefully, cruelly. Wishing he'd die after torture—that sort of thing."

"The modern mode of the amorous?"

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"As modern as Genesis. Tony doesn't like her."

"The thing is absurd. He is old enough to be her father."

"Well—maybe, if Dot is only seventeen, as they say she is. She seems older than that to me. But, someway, no one could imagine Tony's being a father to anything."

"When I was down last month you were liking him a lot, I thought."

"A man doesn't have to be a father to be liked, does he? Yes—I like Tony. He is sort of sweet, and he's not money-minded—and he's not very happy, and he had a miserable boyhood. All right, smile if you must. I do feel sorry for him and perhaps I am getting maudlin. I'm quite sure I am because lately all I do is feel sorry for everyone up at Meriwether. I'm sick of feeling sorry."

"Indeed I should think so," I sympathized. "Sorrowing for all the occupants of Meriwether is a tidy job in itself."

"No. That's another trouble. Most of the boarders have left—just for vacations—they've all kept their rooms. The Claussen family, all five of them, and the three Fredericks have gone on an excursion tour of Alaska. Paul's mother and Miss Winslow and her mother and the little boy have gone to the mountains for a month, and Polly Kent is in the hospital for an operation. Helene's closed the entire annex—she's having it done over—and she has dismissed three of the maids for the summer. It does seem Scotchy, but I

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don't blame her, because she is so eager to begin building the new annex by next summer. What I hate about it is that, just overnight, those of us who are left at Meriwether have become 'all one big family.' Everybody is first-naming everybody else and gushing with informality."

"If this be sweet pity," said I, "make the most of it."

"No, but I mean that we all know one another's affairs, and—well, one has to feel sorry. They cut Paul's salary at the radio station and dismissed the operator—so he has to do almost double work on less salary. It isn't the money so much—he feels hurt about it, you know. And poor old Sarah Parnham had hoped and hoped for that position in Mittigan College—they'd all but promised it to her—and last week they wrote saying that they were cutting their staff and couldn't take her on. That miserable stepmother of hers threw an agonizing scene right in the dining room. And Oswald's poor old grandfather died, and Oswald felt he should have gone to see him at the last, but he didn't know he was so ill. And Tony——"

"To be sure," I interpolated, hastily. Mr. Antony Charvan was opening the door of the shoppe.

He was a tall, healthy-looking man, pleasant enough with his manners and speech; and as he came forward and greeted me I found myself, as always, where he was concerned, annoyed because I could not like the fellow. The likable persons whom one meets and should like and can't and won't like are, I think, to be

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classed among life's larger vexations. Recognizing a dislike for Mr. Charvan was like recognizing a dislike for soap or prayer, and could lead only to self-searching and self-condemnation.

My one excuse for carping lay in the fact that I did not know and could not discover how he had ever earned, or was now earning, his means of livelihood. He had a strong, well-trained baritone voice. For fifteen minutes each evening he sang over ABC, with Paul Keasy as his accompanist at the piano, in connection with advertising for a local furniture store. To the best of my knowledge, this fifteen-minute song recital was his only vocation. Honorable enough, without question, but not, one would think, remunerative enough for him to live at Meriwether, dress well, and though he did not own a car, give an impression of being always well in funds. If he were, as he seemed to be, independent of his earnings, why in the nation should he trouble to sing at a jerkwater radio station?

As I watched Vicky talking to him I longed to hang onto her heels as I used to when she was a little girl and leaned to look out of high windows or into deep holes. Fear? Yes, I feared the man on Vicky's account. Why? Prejudice seemed to be the only answer. Granted that the fellow was an adventurer and a scamp. Vicky had met adventurers and scamps on four continents and had emerged unscathed. Conscience suggested that I was jealous. I knew it was a confounded lie; but it was effective enough to shame me into silence when Vicky returned from walking with him to the

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doorway and presented a preposterous plan for the evening.

We, she and I, were to meet Mr. Charvan at a corner drugstore not far from Meriwether at fifteen minutes past eight o'clock that evening. We were then to take him across the town—in her car of course—to the radio station, where we were to wait about while he got his singing done, before motoring with him over to the seacoast—a distance of twenty miles—for a dip in the surf, icy cold at any season of the year. On our way home we were to stop at a little place which Vicky described as "sweet" and "little" for a shore dinner.

"They'll have a small dead pineapple salad," said I, "buried in warm white mayonnaise with a canned cherry and cheese on its grave."

"Oh," said Vicky, "you are worrying about my transiting Mars conjoining my sun today. That is in the fourth house, darling—the home, you know. It couldn't mean accidents on short journeys."

"No," said I. "Mars momentarily had left my mind. I was wondering, only, why you and I should transport this gentleman to his work and to his pleasures and hang about corner drugstores and radio stations into the bargain."

"It is that Saturn, Mercury parallel of yours still in force, I think. You don't mean to be selfish, and you aren't, really, but——"

"I was wondering," said I, "what aspect you might

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have coming in the future that would mean dignity, my dear?"

"Well, but," said Vicky, "who ever said drugstores weren't dignified? Look at the marvelous things drugs have done for humanity—for the what-you-may-call-it of civilization. Look at anæsthetics alone . . ." It is her usual manner with argumentation. One, in time, becomes accustomed to it.

I filled my pipe. "Perhaps," I suggested, "there are a few errands Mr. Charvan might like to have us run for him such as getting his laundry, returning some library books, anything helpful of the sort before we meet him at the drugstore?"

"If I'd known," said Vicky, gently, "that you loathed drugstores I'd have said the Methodist church steps. The place doesn't matter—just so that we don't hurt people's feelings and make them jealous and—you know."

"I am afraid that I don't, entirely."

"It is sort of what I was trying to tell you when Tony came in. Oswald and Paul seem to be jealous—they still think they like me too much, you know. And Helene—I love Helene but I can't understand her. She doesn't like Tony—not a bit. And she doesn't want him for Dot, nor anything of that sort. But she doesn't like it when Tony is nice to me. If we happen to be alone together she always joins us, or sends someone else in. It is past the coincidence stage—and it is worse since we've all narrowed down so."

"Mr. Charvan is nearer her age than yours," I said.

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"And, after all, she is charming, and she is a widow——"

"But I just told you, dear, she doesn't like Tony. I really wonder that she lets him stay on at Meriwether. Usually she won't, when she doesn't like anyone. She can be choosey. She is making piles of money, and she has a waiting list already for the new annex when she gets it built. Let me see, though—where was I?"

"You began with the avoidance of hurting other people's feelings. Forgive me, but I am wondering why you don't solve the problem simply by having nothing to do with Mr. Charvan."

"But don't you see," said Vicky, sweetly patient, "that is exactly what they are all trying to make me do? There's no sense in it. Why should I? Tony's sweet, and I feel sorry for him."

"You used to feel sorry for Paul Keasy," I reminded her. "And you had, as I remember, wealths of pity for little Oswald Fleep."

"Yes, of course. And I still do. I still have. You shouldn't blame me for feeling sorry for people who aren't happy. As I say, it may be maudlin but I can't help it, so you shouldn't blame me for it. I don't blame you for things you can't help, Candy darling. Lately it seems to me that you don't like me as much as you used to."

What chance had I? What chance has any man with the adorable, infuriating Vickys of the world? Promptly at fifteen minutes past eight o'clock that evening I arrived with my niece in her car at the drug-

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store on the corner of Lewis Avenue and Twelfth Street.

CHAPTER 6

"BUT," said Vicky, "I thought he'd be here," and scanned the hot dusty streets with her big brown eyes, made a trifle less soft because of her puckered brows.

"Does he often keep you waiting on corners?" I asked, lightly.

"Once before he did," she admitted. "That was two months ago. I haven't met him since. That was why I thought he'd be here early this evening."

Five minutes later I suggested that we wait no longer for the tardy gentleman. Vicky explained that were we to leave now there would be no way for him to get across the town in time to keep his radio appointment. It was not, she said, her custom to let people down. She would wait. She would take him to ABC. She would leave him there, and never speak to him again.

Five minutes later still, when I noticed her face going white, I changed my tactics. "He'll have some satisfactory explanation," said I, and shook in my shoes.

"That is impossible. Meriwether is a short walk from here. It feeds his vanity to keep girls waiting on him. He was to meet Dot at my place this after-

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noon and go with her to select some drawing materials. You saw when he came in—an hour later. No—he keeps us waiting in order to humiliate us. He kissed me last night. I thought he was sweet. He is a low beast, and I wish I could kill him."

Only once before in her life had I seen Vicky angry. I had seen her petulant, pouty, cross, but not overtaken by this devastating fury that through generations has been a curse of the Van Garter family. Twice I had seen my brother Henry, her father, a victim of this cruel fury. Once in my own lifetime I had experienced it myself. The reason I did not kill the cur who had invoked my rage was that another man found him first—in Alaska it was, and a young woman was involved. The reason Vicky did not get her man was owing entirely to the grace of God.

We were riding along a country road in her car. A man ahead of us, in a larger car, pursued a gray kitten for half a mile, zigzagging from right to left in an attempt to run it down. We were helpless. We could not pass him or stop him. At last, when the kitten made for a gate, he deliberately ran over the frightened thing and crushed it and drove on.

A youngster, four or five years old, came running, picked the mangled animal up in his arms, shut his eyes, and wailed aloud. Vicky jumped out of the car. I followed her. She took the bleeding thing away from the lad, wiped his dirty little overalls with her scarf, tossed it down, filled his pockets with all the money she had in her bag, said, "Never mind, sweetheart,

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I'll kill him for you," and was back in her car and away before I had caught my breath.

I stayed by the gate with the boy. She drove along like a demon, passed the man at the first widening stretch of road, and whirled her car crosswise in front of his. He might have crashed into her. She said that she knew he would take the ditch, and he did so and broke his leg. He threatened suit, but his attorney advised against it after consulting with our attorney.

The reasons for Henry's rages I shall not go into here; though they too could be placed under the generous headings of just anger and righteous indignation. No Van Garter has ever boasted of the family temper. All of us, I think, have felt that for a man or a woman to give himself or herself over wholly to any emotion for any cause was an undesirable proceeding. But one and all we have worried along with it and kept out of jail and found some small satisfaction in the fact that our angers have been aroused because of wrong done to the other fellow. I thought it well to remind the child, as we sat there in the spiteful heat, of those footnotes, unselfish, modest, in the family annals.

"Well, this is a fine time," she retorted, "to drag out those moldy old stories, isn't it? And you don't know at all what you are talking about. This wasn't a date this evening—it was an issue."

Neither of us spoke again until half-past eight o'clock when, "We'll go home," said Vicky, and stamped on the starter.

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As we drove up the long winding road that took us to the top of the high hill where Meriwether, nearly magnificent, stood in its wide, well-kept grounds, I said, "There'll be a reason, dear. Wait and see. Possibly the heat has affected him and you'll find him ill—or he may have met with an accident. There'll be a reason, and a good one."

"Yes," she agreed, amazingly, "there has to be a reason. If he isn't here at home ill, and isn't singing over the radio—but he can't be singing down there when he didn't meet us—I'll think we should worry about him and look for him."

Had I been given to prayer extemporaneous I believe I should have indulged in fervent thanksgiving right then. It is as well that I forwent my pæans. They would have been premature.

As Vicky and I stepped into the front hallway I looked up and saw Helene Bailey and Sarah Parnham coming down the stairs. They called their greetings, and I perforce must wait and take their hands and inquire as to their welfare.

I liked Helene Bailey. She was a serene, pretty little matron with a genius for hospitality and more than her fair share of pluck, common sense, and good humor. She had come to Satoria-by-the-Bay about ten years ago, had bought Meriwether, remodeled it, and turned it into a boarding house. In five more years, I thought, she would own a flourishing hotel; another five years, a string of hotels. Asked for the secret of her success in a business so difficult she had once said

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to me, "Good coffee; sharp knives. Take your discounts and keep your mouth shut, and that's all there is to it." Yes, I liked and admired her. I liked the sturdy handshake she gave me that evening, and I reluctantly released it for Sarah Parnham's damp, silk-gloved grasp.

Vicky asked, as if she didn't care, "Is anyone at home?"

"Not a soul," Helene answered. "Sarah has persuaded me that it will be cooler down at a movie. Come go along with us, you two, won't you? We'll all go in my car. Or we could drive over toward the beach. Tony Charvan said at dinner that he'd seen you at Vicky's place, Mr. Van Garter, and I supposed you'd carried her right off to the seashore with you to get cool."

"Thanks a lot, Helene," Vicky said, "but Uncle is tired from his trip down and I think we'd better stay here and rest and keep quiet." She turned and went strolling, or pretending to stroll, toward the living room and the radio that stood just on the other side of the archway.

I opened the front door for the ladies. I bowed. I think that I did not push them out of the hall onto the porch, but I cannot be certain of this. I could hear the radio's tubes buzzing. I could see Vicky turning the dial. At the very instant that I closed the front door Antony Charvan's voice boomed out:

"'Plucky lot she cared for idols when I kissed 'er where she stud! On the road to Mandalay . . .'"

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Vicky said, "It was deliberate. I'll kill him."

"'An' the dawn comes up like thunder . . .'"

"He made love to me last night. I thought I liked it. I'll kill him."

"'With 'er arm upon my shoulder an' 'er cheek agin my cheek . . .'"

"He had a theory. He told Dot. He said no woman loved a man until he had humiliated her at least once and she had accepted the humiliation. I will kill him. Dead. You hear me? I will kill him dead before I sleep tonight."

Before any of us slept that night we found him dead in the third room to the left of the passage.

CHAPTER 7

GRANTED, if you will, that the person who first promptly and freely confesses to a murder is never in any case the guilty person. Granted, if you choose, that the person who loudly threatens a killing shortly before the victim is found murdered has never, under any circumstances, been guilty of the crime, though judges and juries have been known perversely to think otherwise. Granted, since we are at the business, you sorely tried and true readers of mystery tales, that whoever may have committed the murder, from the crooked-legged housemaid in the attic to Cadwallader Van Garter himself who, for all you know, may be

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writing this narrative from state's prison to clean his conscience or to pay his lawyers, Victoria Van Garter is above reproach. That is to say, because she has admitted her guilt, because she had motive, opportunity, and a temper that during brief moments made murder a possibility in her living programme, Vicky as a suspect is ruled out. Well and good; and forget, if you please, and if you can, that of all the group the only one of us who objected to Lynn MacDonald's engagement as crime analyst for the affair was Vicky; and from this point forward let no misgiving mind or distrustful eye turn in that sweet child's direction.

Whom, then, shall we suspect? Innocent all until we are proved guilty, the elimination of Vicky leaves no paucity of material for the sleuth. Conceivably, at least, any disengaged person who was that night in the town might have taken a whimsical notion to rid the world of Antony Charvan; might have done so. I have noticed, however, that the more satisfactory results in crime detection are seldom obtained by adopting, at the outset at least, a vision so extraneous. In our own home, when we have found a gnawed bone on the hearthrug, we have called our own dog rather than the neighbor's dog for remonstrance.

Some theory of this sort seemed to be in the mind of Lieutenant Wirt when he addressed us, huddled about in the hall, on the night of the murder.

"Which of you folks," questioned he, "were here in the house at the time this here thing transpired?" And a glint came into his eye, and a grimness turned at his

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mouth as he listened to our avowals that none of us had been present in the house at the time the murder had taken place.

"Any of you deef?" was his next inquiry.

"I am," said I, "very slightly."

"Ahm," said he. Merely, "Ahm"; but it moved me, stood me apart from my fellow criminals and conspirators. This preferment of the lieutenant's entitles me, I think, to list my own name first in the group of our suspects. List us I feel I should in the interest of order. We, below, are the birds to watch; the guys from whose shoes the samples of clay are to be taken; the bozoes whose cigarette ashes are to be analyzed; the Johns whose clothes are to afford, if they ravel as they should, the single threads of tweed.

1. CADWALLADER VAN GARTER: Obese uncle of the adorable Vicky.
2. HELENE BAILEY: Comely, efficient owner of Meriwether. Charming hostess. Pretty widow.
3. DOT BAILEY: Helene's buxom daughter, said to be only seventeen years old.
4. SARAH PARNHAM: Unwed, intelligent school teacher; but bony, very bony.
5. EVADNE PARNHAM: Sarah's childishly silly, vain and useless stepmother.
6. PAUL KEASY: Radio operator and announcer. You have met him with his affectations, complexes, and curling eye-

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lashes. In love with Vicky and her money.

7. OSWALD FLEEP: A mild-seeming, quiet little man, soon to be introduced. You will like him at first, I think, as I did, in spite of his freckles and pale, blinking eyes. His mania, you remember, astrology. His love, but hopeless, Vicky. His occupation, owner of O. Fleep's Men's Furnishing Store.

8. MERKEL: My excellent British chauffeur, successor to Nicky.

9. ORILLA WINTERS: Crooked-legged housemaid who slept in the attic. More of Orilla later—but not, I trust, too much more.

10. ANTONY CHARVAN: Victim, of course. Ah, yes, but victims can be wily and, by means of cords tied to pistols, spring traps, and other do-dads, murder themselves in order to wreak vengeance on their rivals. Can—but do they? Often? As for the love element, you have heard Vicky on the subject.

Here we are then, including Antony and omitting Vicky and the cook, a Mrs. Le Vray, wickedly French, you perceive, and hence an admirable suspect but for the fact that she was not there. She had bullied Helene into allowing her to have every other Saturday eve-

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ning and Sunday morning off duty, during the summer months. Her threat was immediate notice. Her excuse, a small, recently purchased farm ten miles out from the town, and a new grandchild. She had left Meriwether at seven o'clock on Saturday evening, had gone to her farm and stayed there until Sunday late morning. If you like, though, you may keep an eye on pudgy little Mrs. Le Vray with her gaudy gingham dresses and her fallen arches. There is no doubt about it, what the woman would do with chives and tarragon amounted to black magic in salad savoriness.

Ten of us, then, or eleven if you insist, to watch closely while I return and recount our comings and goings on the night of the first murder. And, though I shall strive for open honesty, I can report only my own impressions; so it may be well to remember that the hand is quicker than the eye and that David said in his haste, "All men are liars."

CHAPTER 8

WE HAVE assumed that Vicky was falsifying when she declared her intention of killing Antony Charvan before she slept that night. I did not believe her as she spoke, not for one moment. I meant to keep that young woman safely under my guard until her mean temper had had time to cool.

Because Mr. Charvan's voice with each booming

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word seemed to increase her fury, I tried to snap the radio off; but she would not have it so. She listened through the final dawn with its thunder and, when telephone requests came in for an encore, she listened to the thing straight through again and on while Paul Keasy said, "Thanks, Tony, great stuff!" And, continuing, in order, one supposes, to seem all cozy-like, homey, and human, "Folks, folks! What wouldn't I give, besides my right arm, to have a voice like Tony's here! By Jove, there goes the telephone again asking for more. Answer it, will you, Tony? We are a little short-handed up here tonight, folks. Thanks, old chap. Sorry we can't have another song, but we have something else pretty fine waiting here for you, and Tony I guess must have a date with his girl friend, the way he is dolling up and trying to rush off. Look at him blush! Sorry, old man. All right now, ladies and gentlemen of the radio audience, stand by for the Barking Boiler Company's Hour."

Mercifully then Vicky leaned forward and turned off the radio. But she stayed in her chair close to the archway between the hall and the huge living room, and she fixed her eyes, dangerously wide and dark, on the front door through which Mr. Charvan would, doubtless, soon enter.

"Let me be a part of your plans, my dear," said I. "How do they go? The moment Mr. Charvan comes through the door you are going to leap at him and tear him to shreds—am I getting it right?—after which you and I will have only to dispose of the body."

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She rose from her chair, went into the back part of the house, and returned, quickly, with a large, murderous-looking carving knife which I promptly took away from her and, after opening the window and unlatching the screen, tossed out into the yard.

"Smarty!" said Vicky, and further and much more said Vicky—all better forgotten—before at last she threw herself down on a davenport and burst into tears and became about five years old again with a smudgy face and sticky-mouth kisses. So I went and sat close beside her and provided a shoulder and handkerchiefs while she cried it out. Yes, cried it out, I thought—all the mean temper and hate and passion that have cursed the Van Garter name. Cried it out I was certain when, during the final damp sniffles, she wént into the hall and returned with her handbag and found her vanity case and set about thoroughly powdering her nose. Since then I have been told that one of the best things murderesses do is powder their noses; but then so untried was I in crime that I thought the action signified Mr. Charvan's reprieve and her own repentance.

"It is hopeless," she finally decided. "I'll have to go upstairs and wash my face and start over."

Midway of the room she whirled and spoke in a scared whisper. "Good grief! Suppose he came in just now while I was howling!"

"Impossible," said I. "We should have seen and heard him."

We had been sitting on one of the two large daven-

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ports drawn up on each side of the fireplace. From this position we could see neither the front door nor the stairway. Mr. Charvan or anyone else or several others could have come in quietly two or three times while Vicky was crying without either of us being aware of the circumstance.

A man I knew and did not admire said once, as he crunched a clove from his pearl-gray vest pocket, that there were but two sorts of ladies: those to whom men lied, and those to whom men did not trouble to lie. Poor fellow, he is not now, I hope, receiving his just deserts or being forced, amid other tortures, to emend his epigram: Two sorts of men—those who lie to ladies and those who are blessed with brains at birth.

"Rot!" said Vicky, and looked at her watch. "No, it is only ten minutes past nine; so he hasn't come in, unless he took a taxi, and I'm sure we'd have heard it coming up the hill. If he comes while I'm upstairs be lovely to him, darling. Don't let him suspect that you are even slightly annoyed."

It was ten minutes past nine o'clock, then—time is usually important—when Vicky went upstairs. How long was she up there? Bless my soul, I don't know. As long as it takes an exquisitely beautiful girl to remove traces of tears, trim up her face with unguents and lotions, paints and powders, and change her frock. Long enough, perhaps, to ascend to the attic and engage Orilla the housemaid to shoot Mr. Charvan instantly upon his arrival above stairs? Possibly, but I

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think not. This theory, too, is damaged by the facts that from first to last Orilla stoutly declared that she was not in the vicinity of Meriwether from half-past seven in the evening until some time close to midnight and that, even as yet, no one has disproved her statement.

At any rate, when Vicky came down again she was wearing a primrose yellow frock and she was very lovely as she quoted a rough and rowdy remark of the Lady Crowinshank's and declared that food for me was immediately imperative. For herself, the thought of food was repellent. The idea of descending from the now coolish heights of Meriwether to the stagnate heart of the town could not be considered. I must telephone for Merkel.

Sure of the fixity of her purpose, but slightly unsure of her motive, I ended the argument by telephoning to Merkel and telling him to bring chicken sandwiches and ice cream and anything else that looked cold and edible up to us as fast as he could.

While I was thus instructing Merkel, Vicky went to drive her car around from the front of the house into the garage at the rear. She left the front door wide open and, as I passed it on my way upstairs to her bathroom, I noticed that the outside air now seemed a trifle cooler than the air in the house, so I did not close the door nor did I think to latch the screen door on the inside.

In the upper hall, just before I stepped into Vicky's room, I fancied I heard a noise, rather as if someone

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were pounding on the kitchen door below stairs. I paused and listened; but as the sound was not repeated I went along and thought no more about it.

When I came out into the hall again I was distressed at hearing the raucous voice of the radio shrieking through the place. Whoever had turned it on had no desire, apparently, for aught save noise, since several programmes, mixed with static, were sounding forth together at full tilt and volume.

I reached the thing with all possible haste. Why I did not shut it off entirely and at once I do not know; some notion of courtesy, perhaps, toward the invisible person who had turned it on, for I saw that I was alone in the room. At any rate, I contented myself with twirling the dial and was rewarded with, ". . . ABC. Paul Keasy is your announcer. At the stroke of the gong it will be one second past ten o'clock by the Tick-Tock Time Signals . . ."

I took out my watch and, as I waited for the gong, I noticed that the front door had been closed; an incident which, I must confess, registered in my mind merely as a fact and caused me to feel neither apprehension nor curiosity. The gong sounded. My time was correct. I snapped off the radio.

Vicky came "Hey-heying" from the back of the house, and at the same moment Evadne Parnham and Dot Bailey came in through the front door.

To avoid confusion I must state here that the garage was joined to the house by an enclosed passageway that led directly into the kitchen. Since the garage

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doors had patent locks, which locked automatically on the inside when the doors were closed, the doors of the passageway were never locked. From the front of the house to the garage was a longish walk—more than halfway around the enormous house. Naturally, then, all the members of the household used the passageway when they went to take their cars out of the garage, or after they had put them in it. Such quantity of detail surpasses mere dullness, I know. But how else could I explain why Vicky came from the back of the house and what she had been doing there?

CHAPTER 9

As I VIEW it now, immediately on catching sight of Vicky I should have asked whether she had turned on the radio and closed the front door and, if not, who had done so. I should have conferred with her as to the knocking I had heard on the kitchen door. I should have noted that she had taken longer than usual to put her car in the garage, and I should have demanded an explanation of the wasted time.

I asked none of these questions because none of them chanced to occur to me. I returned Evadne Parnham's effusive greeting and Dot's chilly nod (Dot's pose, when she remembered it, was remoteness, patterned, I believe, from Garbo and Dietrich but unsuc-

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cessfully), and, conscious of no fault, sat my fat self down to wait impatiently for Merkel.

Evadne Parnham, obligingly taking Dot's hat and handbag with her, went upstairs. Dot swaggered across the room and turned on the radio and a din of jazz to fright a monster's ears, and I suggested to Vicky that she and I retreat to the porch.

We had not much more than found chairs out there, I had not finished filling my pipe, when Evadne Parnham joined us. She complained of the heat. We agreed. She asked if we knew where Sassy was. We told her. She said that it was too hot to enjoy a show. She and Dot had planned to go another—had gone early in order to get two into the evening, but had come home on account of the heat. She told us, at labyrinthian length, the plot of the picture they had seen, and gave way to regrets because, after all, it was not much cooler here than in the picture show, and it was much duller.

Vicky asked whether she and Dot had walked up the hill in the heat. Evadne said they had not. They had gone down with Oswald Fleep after dinner and had come home in a taxicab. Dot's treat, she explained, and just, because she, Evadne, had treated to milk-shakes. "Gee!" she interrupted herself rather startlingly here, "I shouldn't have told that. Don't tell Helene. Dot's away over weight, you know, and Helene is trying to make her diet. I think it's awfully mean of her. Like I told Dot tonight, she's only young once, and if her mother didn't object to her smoking

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the poor kid wouldn't get so hungry. I told Dot I'd just go ahead and smoke, if I were her. Like I said, what's one more little secret, anyway? Considering some of the things Dot gets away with, smoking wouldn't rate at all. Dot tells me everything, I guess, the poor kid. Gee, I get a real kick out of it sometimes. I don't know, but there's always been something about me that just loves a secret. Maybe that's naughty of me? But I'll bet you'll admit yourself, Mr. Van Garter, that they are kind of fun, specially for a person that has a real sense of 'umor like mine."

She paused, and a response seemed indicated, but I had lost the place. Vicky answered for me, "Uncle wouldn't know about secrets. He has never kept one long enough to grow fond of it."

"That's what you think," said Evadne, and emphasized the "you" and laughed loudly, beginning on a high note. Dark though it was, I could plainly see the wrinkles lifting Vicky's small, fastidious nose.

Merkel's arrival just then was welcome. He stopped the car at what seemed an unnecessarily long distance from the house—well down the driveway, in fact. But knowing that Merkel's every movement was well considered, I found reason for this one. He had, I thought, heard Evadne Parnham's laughter and decided that by sneaking quietly on foot to the back entrance he and the car might be unobserved, and the shameful facts of an empty larder and a supper sent late from town might remain unknown to the guests.

Perversely, while never ceasing to marvel at and

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delight in his excellent training, I enjoyed disrupting it at times. So I called to him. "Hello, Merkel," said I. "Bring it this way and save yourself steps."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," said he; and continued, as he came to the porch, "Very sorry to be so late, sir. I hope I haven't kept you waiting, sir." Merkel's "h's" were as definite as my own, and as Paul Keasy's voice came to us just then over the radio, I wondered what price he would be willing to pay for my chauffeur's pronunciations and mellifluous inflections.

Vicky led the way into the kitchen. Merkel deposited his neatly packed baskets on the table—not Merkel to fumble with loose parcels—and at my bidding, and with further expressions of gratitude because I had said that he need not wait, that I would call him at the hotel later, he departed through the kitchen doorway.

Evadne Parnham had followed us. Dot appeared, suggesting that we had better leave the kitchen clean because Mother had to get breakfast in the morning and she'd be jittery if she found a messed-up place. We assured her of our tidy intentions and invited her and Evadne to sup with us.

Evadne said she would have only a glass of ginger ale and a smoke, to soothe her nerves, found her cigarette case was empty, and went upstairs to replenish it.

Dot remarked, "She's good. She thinks she'd have to help get things ready if she stayed down here," and stood leaning against a cupboard practising remote-

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ness while Vicky—who had returned from a quick dash into the front hall—and I fussed with cartons and glasses and ice cubes and carried laden trays to her table, which she had set for four, in the dining room.

The effort, slight as it was, had made us overwarm again; so Vicky turned out the lights in the dining room and lighted some candles, explaining that they would look cooler than the other lights and make a party besides. And I, just before the three of us sat down to the supper, wandered away into the living room and turned off the radio and Paul Keasy's voice, again announcing time signals: one minute past eleven o'clock, said he, by the Tick-Tock Time Signals.

My reward was the malediction heaped upon all radio silencers. "You don't," said Dot, when I returned, "care at all for music, do you, Mr. Van Garter?"

Vicky said, "He adores it. Do sit down, Uncle—we won't wait for Evadne——"

"No," said Evadne, as she came just then through the pantry doorway, "of course not—nobody ever waits for me." She was smoking, but her nerves were unsoothed, one would think.

"I'm sorry," said Vicky. "We thought you'd like to have us go on."

"That's all right about that," Evadne answered. "But I'll tell you this, Dot Bailey, if your mother doesn't make that Orilla be more careful with my instrument——"

"Forget it," Dot advised. "She has to dust it. You

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rave if she doesn't. As it happens, since Sadie left I've been dusting your room myself. What's the matter? Did I move your xylophone two inches back, or one inch forward——"

"Oh, you did it, did you? Well, I'm going to speak to Helene. Somebody's got to pay for repairs, and if she takes my advice it will be you and out of vour allowance."

"Mother has never made a habit of taking your advice. The thing was all right this morning. What did you do? Break it yourself, and decide to blame me and make Mother pay for it?"

Vicky intervened with her lovely tact and glasses of icy ginger ale. Evadne drank deeply but to no benefit because, when she spoke again, anger was still hot in her high childish voice. "All right for you, Dot Bailey. I'll see that Helene makes you apologize for this. Sassy and I will leave, if you don't——"

"Go and see if we care. That is, if you'll pay your back board bill before you leave."

"Would you care," the woman's voice slithered with insult through mock sweetness, "honey dear, if I took your tissue and carbon papers with me when I left?"

Dot jumped from her chair and slapped Evadne in the face. "Take that for yourself," she said, and the candelabrum swayed and went out and scattered the candles, "and that for Tony Charvan!" She pushed Vicky out of the way and ran into the hall and up the stairs.

Evadne screamed something that ladies should not,

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and started after her. I stood in the way and got my shins soundly kicked. Vicky, embarrassed, dismayed, attempted to comfort and quiet Evadne but with no success, because self-pity set in and induced tears, interspersed with threats and loud denunciations. The gutted candles smoked and smelled abominably. I set them up and tried to relight them, but the wicks were wet and would not take the flame, so we were still in semidarkness when Helene Bailey and Sarah Parnham came upon us with, "Mercy, what's the matter?" and, "What is the trouble here?"

Evadne explained at the top of her voice that Dot Bailey had slapped her, had half killed her, and that she, Evadne, intended to sue and see that Dot was put in jail.

Helene Bailey switched on the dining-room lights. "But where is Dot?" she asked, and repeated, before we could answer, "But where is Dot, I say?"

Vicky said, "She is upstairs, I think," and Mrs. Bailey turned and went almost running across the room.

Sarah Parnham called to her, "Helene," she said, "never mind. It's all right. Evadne isn't hurt. Don't go up now. You know, it would be better to leave Dot alone for a little while."

Mrs. Bailey, who had paused in the doorway, frowned and shook her head and went right along.

"You're letting yourself in for a scene," Sarah scolded. "Wait a minute, Helene. I'll go up with you."

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