COUNTERFEIT

LEE THAYER

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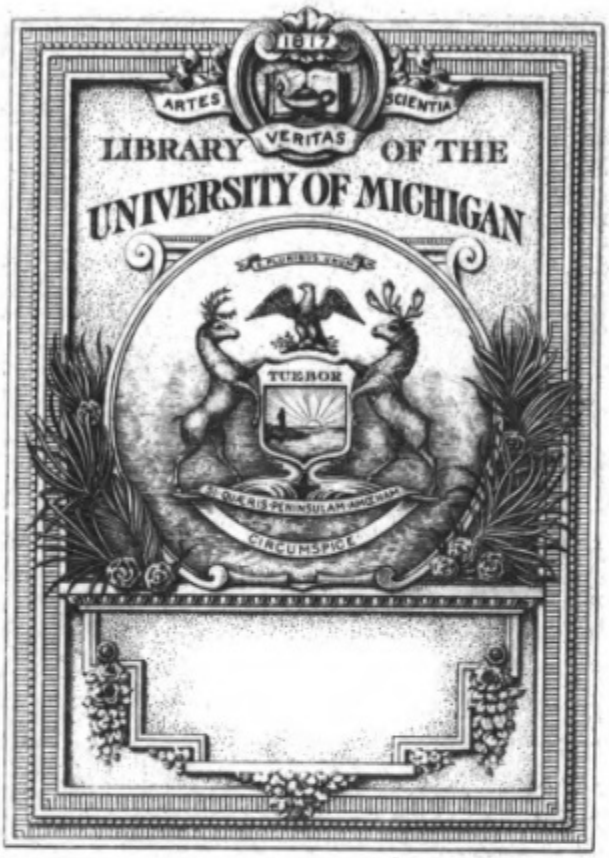

BEQUEST OF
ORMA FITCH BUTLER, PH.D., '07
PROFESSOR OF LATIN

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By

LEE THAYER

author of

"HELL-GATE TIDES,"

"THE GLASS KNIFE," etc.

New York

SEARS PUBLISHING COMPANY

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COUNTERFEIT

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To Ralph E. Lum, Senior and Junior, to Doctor Roderick Byington, to Mr. Harry Groesbeck, and all those others who have so generously supplied the necessary technical details to my career of crime, this book is gratefully dedicated.

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O. F. BUTLER
BEQUEST
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29 - 40 DAY

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COUNTERFEIT

CHAPTER I

A CURIOUS place this old Island of Manhattan. A strange, incredible mass of magic rock, so full, apparently, of the eternal creative urge that of its living self it seems to raise huge towers to the sky. Crop after crop of structural stone and steel: year after year a turning in of the lowlier harvest, a sowing and planting for a larger growth, that in its turn yields ever to taller and taller plants, reared from a fertile and congenial soil; root, branch, blossom and fruit—stone—stone and steel.

A stranger from Mars, viewing the stupendous staggering crop, might wonder at the evidences here and there of infertility, or perhaps of careless reaping. Low spots where the yield was inferior in every way—in substance, size, color, durability. Where, inexplicably, there persisted from a former era an individual plant as out of date in material and in structure as the little early Tertiary tree-shrew that started out to become man.

If there had been a Martian stalking unseen along the streets one rainy night in this year of our era 193—, he could have found, perhaps, no better place to consider this matter of unequal growth than the low spot in the darkish furrow of Twenty-ninth Street, just a little way along from the broad, light-splashed garden path of Fifth Avenue. For here the contrast was striking and extreme. Upon the Avenue a church spire of flowered stone, that had once blossomed in the sun was eclipsed and shadowed north, south and east, by towers of materiality so tremendous as to make

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of its own aspirations a thing of pity. Only toward the west was there a hint of breathing room—a space where the original relativity between things spiritual and mundane had, so far, been allowed to persist, at least to the eye. Here, crouching low behind the baptistery of the church, shrinking back from the street, sheltering itself from view behind a tall, dark board fence, was a low brick building almost as dark. One upper window only showed tiny horizontal slits of light between the partly closed slats of an old fashioned shutter. In the solid wooden fence, at the end nearest the church was an opening defended by magnificent wrought iron gates.

These, quite probably, would have been of no interest to the problematic Martian, but they obviously were to the taxi driver who, at about ten o'clock of that rain-swept night of late fall, drew up before them and peered out inquisitively.

"Guess this is the place, Miss," he said after a minute, as he pushed the glass slide behind him a little farther open. "You want I should drive in?" The meter was ticking merrily and there seemed to him no reason for haste. But the girl he had picked up at the Grand Central apparently felt differently about it.

"Oh, dear," she cried, (without affectional intent however), "it's getting so late! And I'm sure this can't be the place. I expected to be here hours ago. I don't know what to do. This can't be it. Nobody could live here."

"You said the first door west of Fifth Avenue on the north side of Twenty-ninth Street. This is it, and I don't mean maybe," said the taximan somewhat severely.

"This is a gate, not a door," the girl remonstrated. She was small and rather nicely plump, with determined, large, steady blue eyes. The cabman had thought his fare "cute" when he saw her, standing beside her luggage in the bright light of the station driveway. But there was something, even in that brief glimpse that warned him as to behavior.

"Well," he admitted, "you're right at that—in a way. This here's a gate, but the building back in there most likely

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has a door. It's up to you, Miss. Shall I take you somewhere else?"

"I—I don't know," she hesitated, but went on quickly "This would be Number One West Twenty-ninth Street, wouldn't it? Someone explained to me about the streets in New York—how they run crossways and the houses begin to number from Fifth Avenue, so that's why I said it was the first door——"

"Telling me my business," interrupted the driver with a little, good-humored laugh. "Well, you're O.K., Miss. This ought to be Number One. I don't see how it could help itself without the church had a side entrance, which it hasn't; but if it had, that would be Number One and not much more use to a young lady than a gate is, at that."

Merrily, merrily ticked the meter. The rain swished down with that drenching sound of having no place to go that it attains only on completely paved streets.

"Can you see any number on the gate?" She was sure no one could, for she had been forcing her own powers of sight to the limit. It was rather a preface to a request that she was not sure she had any right to make. But it was so awfully wet, and she had just that one good suit. "Or is there any way you could find out if this is the right place?" she suggested, trying to sound off-hand and experienced.

The driver proved unexpectedly resourceful. He waited for a car to pass him then backed a little, swung out toward the middle of the street and came forward up a sort of drive-way so as to throw his lights slanting at and through the gates.

"Holy snakes! What's that?" he gasped. "What kind of a place you looking for, Miss? Not a grave yard! I never noticed this here church had one! But if it ain't a graveyard, then what t'ell is it?"

The immobile, whitely gleaming shapes beyond the gates looked cold and awful in the pale glare of the car lamps. For a horrid instant the heart of the girl in the taxi was frozen

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with dread. Then, as her startled perceptions cleared, she laughed with a faint touch of hysteria.

"Nonsense. They don't put Bacchantes in church yards," she cried. "It's just statuary. Though why——"

"Gee, don't it look cold and unchancy," muttered the taxi-man under his breath.

The girl did not hear him. "Look," she cried. "There is a number, over at the other side of the gate. See? One West Twenty-ninth Street. And a bell! Oh, would you mind? Maybe there's someone in the house back there who could tell us."

"Well, Miss, you know it ain't none of my—" He started to say "funeral," but a glance at the pale still occupants of the dark yard made him change it to "business."

"I know." The girl's voice was very sweet and appealing. "But if you'd be so kind."

"St-t-t!" The driver's head, which had been reluctantly thrust outside the shelter of the cab was drawn instantly back. "Here's somebody. Maybe he knows."

A man approaching from the east had stopped beside the gate. His head was bent against the wind. The broad hat that protected him from the downpour had also partially obscured his vision so that he was actually at the gate before he perceived that the car standing there was waiting by intention.

"I say, Mister," bellowed the taxi-man, "d'you belong to this here joint?"

Perhaps it was the suddenness and loudness of the voice that caused the other to start back. The lifted face flashed for an instant in the slanting light. The man must have been dazzled for he threw his hand up before his eyes.

"Oh, Uncle Nat! Uncle Nat!" The fresh young voice, full of relief and hope, sounded clearly above the swish of the rain. "It's Marie! Marie Lamont! Didn't you get my letter? Oh, dear, I thought I was never going to find you. And I was beginning to be—well, you know, just a

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little frightened. But it's all over now. I did have the address right. And I'd have known you anywhere. Mother always kept your picture on her desk. That lovely white hair! Oh please don't think me silly! It's just the relief . . . . . "

She stopped literally for breath. The old man had advanced slowly through the rain and now stood glancing in through the cab window. Beyond the swirling white-gray shaft of the car lamps the light was dim. She could scarcely distinguish the expression on the lined face below the floating mass of snowy hair.

"You are glad I came, Uncle Nat?" she whispered hurriedly. "Long ago mother used to say that I could always depend on you. Your letters were so darling and kind. But we didn't dream it would ever seem right to accept your offer. You said 'any time'. It is all right, isn't it?"

"Yes, yes. Oh, yes." The old man's voice was husky, perhaps from emotion, perhaps from the weather. "Are you—was it your intention——"

"Why, Uncle Nat, you said—a home—if I should ever need it. Is—have I chosen an inconvenient time?"

She was a brave girl but she was very young. Her voice broke in spite of all she could do. The old man started as if he had been stung.

"You're all alone?" he muttered. That it was a question and not an unnecessary statement surprised her.

"Why, of course, Uncle Nat. There's no one now, you know. I have no one to turn to—but you." The last words were low and there was a note of uncertainty approaching alarm in the sweet young voice.

"Yes, yes. Quite right." He murmured something about "Unexpected," "See what can be done," "Perhaps a hotel—," as he opened the cab door and helped the girl with her bag and umbrella.

The taxi driver did not obtrude his anxiety to be of service

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when his passenger alighted, but as she started with the old gentleman to cross to the gates, he called out briskly.

"Hey! Who's paying this fare? Come back here, Miss. You can't get away with it, if you are from the country. Playing innocent!"

"Be silent, you!" The old gentleman spoke with quite unexpected force and came quickly back to the cab which was still headed in across the sidewalk, partly obstructing the footway. At that minute a man and a boy, whose approach, by reason of the rain and dark, had been unnoticed, paused for the way to be cleared. Above the noise of the starting engine the old man's pointed remarks came to them crisply. The taxi driver, having received his money, hastened to get his cab out into the street again. As the lights receded and swung in an arc they picked out in bold relief the group at the gate. The old man, fumbling with the lock, the girl with bright drops that might be rain on her fresh young face; the incongruous juxtaposition of the handsomely wrought gates with the dull and damaged board fence in which they now grudgingly opened. The dim wet figures of nymphs and satyrs faintly shimmering in the broad flagged space, and beyond them the dull red and brown of the old building—dark—save for one window in the upper story.

The two foot passengers passed on quickly, the man remarking in a low, quiet voice, "The old gentleman did himself very well in the matter of the top-coat, Richard. Did you notice? Very good cut. Probably from London and a West End tailor to boot."

To which the boy responded admiringly "'Twould take you to spot a thing like that, Mr. Wiggar. Gee, you sure know your onions and then some. I don't believe I'll ever make a real honest-to-God valet. But I am noticy, too, believe it or not. Only what struck me was what a doggone funny joint it was the old bird was a-taking the easy-look-

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ing little dame into. Did you pipe all them goofy dancing monuments, and the guy on horseback in that there yard?"

"There's no such word as goofy, Dick. Slang is very inelegant. How often must I tell you so? And as to the construction of your sentences——" Mr. Wiggar then embarked upon an expostulatory and expository dissertation on the English language that lasted until after the oddly assorted couple had turned the corner and had faded, one would have thought forever, from the picture.

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CHAPTER II

"FOLLOW me, if you will, and watch where you step. It's rather dark. Mind the curb. There. That's right."

The old man had carefully relocked the gates and was leading the way from the ancient cobbled pavement of the drive, across the flags, toward a small door that could scarcely be distinguished in the faint glow that filtered in from the remote city lights.

The girl, half-blindly following her conductor, had to bite her lip to keep it from trembling. Her father's recent death had been pure agony. Her almost penniless state would have filled her with alarm had she not been certain that she could always find a refuge with this brother of her dead mother; this uncle who had been a sort of fairy god-father to her from her earliest childhood, though, owing to a combination of circumstances, this was the first time she had ever seen him. . . The first time, the very first time he had ever laid eyes on the niece to whom he had sent every year at Christmas such a generous check. . . . Even though obviously he had not received her letter and so had no reason to know she was coming, there was a strangeness and lack of response in his attitude that was utterly unexpected and that struck her cold to the marrow. It was more than indifference. If it had not been so absolutely absurd she would have thought he was afraid of her.

Afraid. . . . . She shivered, and though the old man seemed wrapped in his own thoughts he was instantly aware of the tremor that shook her.

"Sorry," he said crisply, in a low voice, as he turned a key in a grating lock. "Come in. It's warm in here."

Though he did not mention it, it was also entirely dark.

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The girl could form no idea of her surroundings and waited, with what courage she could command, for the switching on of a light. But none came. There was the sound of the door closing behind her, again the complaint of the key in its rusty wards; a faint, dull thump which she rightly guessed was made by her bag as it was dropped on a bare floor. Then her conductor passed her with a few words uttered in so low a tone that she barely made them out.

"Sorry," he repeated. "Be back in a minute. Hope you don't mind the dark. Gas. No matches. Miserable old hole. Just wait where you are. Won't be long."

She heard his step pass very quickly along an uncarpeted floor, then the rapid diminuendo of feet on a stair. Somewhere above a door opened and closed. After a short interval there followed the faint faraway ringing of a strident bell. Then silence such as she had never been conscious of before in all her young life. The swish and swirl of the rising tempest outside, the deep hollow roar of the great city that never pauses nor goes entirely to rest; the reverberation that was like the sound in a sea-shell, or the fear of deafness, in ears accustomed to the voice of the wind and the song of the leaves, only made the silence of this unexplored place where she stood the more heart-searching.

But after a time her pride rose to her defence, burning up the rain and tears upon her cheeks. If it had been possible, she would have registered her sense of the callous discourtesy of leaving her there abandoned in the strange darkness by going out into the driving rain where, at least, coldness and indifference were to be expected and had the merit of being impersonal. This grudging admission to a shelter was like a slap in the face. The few interminable minutes, that seemed hours, filled her with foreboding, anguish and a rising anger that for the time subdued her feeling of dread.

If she had had a little more money in her purse, a little more knowledge of large cities in her mind, she might have

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tried to leave the place then and there. She even went so far along this line of thought as to grope the few steps back to the door. Her outstretched hand touched the panel. Instinctively she grasped the knob and pulled, though she knew the door was locked. She felt for the key and something went cold inside when she realized that it was gone.

Gone! She was virtually a prisoner in a dark house, thousands of miles away from any one to whom she could appeal for help,—except her uncle. Surely she had made no mistake—as to his identity. That would be grotesquely impossible and too awful to contemplate. The address was right. He looked like the picture he had sent them only a few years ago. The same conspicuous shock of white hair . . . . But the light had been dim. Suppose . . . . Suppose . . . . Locked in . . . . with a stranger. . . . .

The darkness became suddenly filled with menace Her heart pounded in her breast and in her throat She clutched her courage in both hands. The suspense was unendurable. There was no retreat. Well, then, she would go forward. Put it to the touch. Find out where she stood,—figuratively —literally.

With a determined straightening of her small, gallant shoulders, she clenched her fists and abandoning her bag where it lay she took a bold step forward.

And at that instant, from somewhere above and at quite a little distance, she saw a light flash; a moving light, reflected on a wall and revealing in rapidly flickering light and shade an old-fashioned stair well. For a second the bearer of the light was unseen, but his footsteps, moving hastily down the uncarpeted upper flight were distinctly audible. Then he came into view. It was her uncle, carrying a big lighted candle in a tall silver holder. For an instant he leaned over the banister, peering down into the darkness. The light that he held aloft made an aureole of his great mass of snowy hair, while at the same time it showed to him

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Marie Lamont struck to immobility by the suddenness of the apparition.

He did not speak but came hastily down the last flight of stairs, and his face, in the wavering candle-light seemed to take on a kinder aspect, though through everything he said and did the girl sensed a strange hesitation—a note—she found herself thinking again—of fear. Fear. Of what? Inexplicably enough, it did seem to be of her. Not just embarrassment at having a young girl thrust unexpectedly upon his hands. It was something other and deeper than that.

"My child." His eyes looked more friendly in the flickering beam from the candle than she would have thought possible. He seemed to have shed, with his outer garments, some of the cold reserve of his former manner, but she was aware that the glance that rested on her face was keen—and something more. "You must forgive me—if I seemed abrupt—out there. So unexpected—your coming, you know. You—you look like your mother, my dear. As she did when she was your age." He put his hand (it was trembling slightly) upon her shoulder, drew her to him and kissed her on the forehead. The caress was, apparently, sincere and tender, but, the instant it was over, she felt again that close, inquiring, watchful scrutiny.

"What is it, Uncle Nat?" she cried, suddenly clasping her hands together. "There's a reason—after all—why you don't want me! And I was so sure——"

"No, no. Don't cry," he broke in, almost angrily. "I do want you! I want you more than—than you can guess. But just at the moment—— You see, my dear, if I'd had your letter, I could have arranged everything. It's just—just——"

"I could go away," she interrupted in her turn, trying desperately to keep her voice quite steady, "but you see I never was in New York before—and—and I have hardly any money left."

"If I let you go out again in this storm, my name's not

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Nathaniel Etherington, and you're not my dear sister Marie's only child!" he exclaimed with heat. "And that's ridiculous, for you're as like her as two prints from the same plate. I'd have known you anywhere. I loved your mother, my child, and even if I seem old and crabbed, I love you, too. Please don't doubt it."

He spoke with an irascible, indignant sort of earnestness that was quaint and somehow very appealing to the tired, lonely girl. She winked hard to shake off the salt drops that had gathered on her tangled lashes, and suddenly broke into a smile.

"Good Lord," cried Nathaniel Etherington, starting back. "That—that was your mother—to the life. I made a little picture of her—I'll show it to you . . . long ago . . . . . Here, carry the candle," he added, briskly. "I'll take your bag. I have a little guest room, of a sort, upstairs. You'll be comfortable for the night at least, and after that," his hesitation was scarcely perceptible, "we'll see what can be done—to make you more so, my child. I want you to be quite—quite happy, you know. That is as happy as an old man can make you."

Without more ado, he gathered up her bag and motioning her to precede him with the candle, they started up the stairs. She hesitated before a door on the first landing.

"Not that one, my—my dear," he called out in a hearty voice. "It's one more flight. Perhaps I'd better lead the way. This seems a queer sort of place to you, no doubt," he went on, quite gaily now, as he passed her and started up the second and last flight of stairs. "It is an awful hole, some people think, but when you get used to it it's not so bad. And there are a great many advantages . . ."

His taciturnity seemed to be dropping from him, step by step. His voice rang with a queer, half exultant note. He had left the door of his apartment open. Marie could see

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the warm light of an open fire reflected on old mahogany. She had a glimpse of a table full of books and an easy chair. Then her uncle turned upon the threshold. He set her bag on the floor and to her amazement held out his arms to her. She thought there were tears in his eyes.

"Welcome," he said, huskily, in a very low voice. "Welcome to your old uncle's lonely fireside, my darling child."

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CHAPTER III

PETER CLANCY contended that he was a deeply religious person, though his friends laughed him to scorn.

"Bet you haven't been inside a church since your mother, God rest her soul, passed where I hope there aren't any little red-headed cherubs to remind her of the imp that worried her so long," remarked Captain of Detectives Jake Kerrigan as he helped himself largely from a casserole that had silently presented itself at his elbow.

"What about your own religion? It's Friday, Jake," warned the third man at the table, following the example of Clancy's other guest. "There's chicken in this, or I'm a Hindu."

"You may as well be, you and Pete, for all the good there is to religion for either of you. This is fish, my lad, though I grant you 'twould be easy to mistake it with all the sauce there is upon it. 'Tis odd, and I've often remarked it, how some kinds of fish do taste quite the same as chicken."

"Nothing is, but thinking makes it so," quoted Peter, laughing.

"And a truer word never was said," Kerrigan agreed, heartily. "I'll trouble you for the salt, Raymond; if you please."

"Most of Pete's assertions would be better for a grain of the same," said Raymond Trant, complying with Kerrigan's request. "What it is he believes I don't know, but well do I remember, when we were together in Paris the day the Armistice was signed—Do you recall that, Pete?"

"Yes," said Clancy, gravely.

"—Even I, Jake, wanted to go into a church to catch up with my feelings and Pete came along."

"Ah-h?" Kerrigan sounded incredulous.

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"It was a swell church. One of the finest." Trant's dark glance rested on Peter Clancy's clever, homely face. "I don't know what there was about it he didn't like, but he gave one glance around—and left."

"I'll bet," said Kerrigan nodding his head.

"And where d'you think he went?"

"How can I guess? You know I never got to go over, Ray. If I'd been in the Secret Service like you, and Pete, too, at the time instead of on the Force——"

"Won't you ever stop grouching about that, Jake? Well, anyway, I'll tell you where Pete went. To the top of the Eiffel Tower. Sight-seeing, at a time like that! Can you beat it?"

Kerrigan seemed to be studying the food on his well-filled plate. "I've seen postcards of that place," he said, slowly. "It's the highest thing you can get up on in that sawed-off city, isn't it?"

His fleeting glance met Peter's, and they both smiled. Between the intelligent police detective and the astute private one there was an underlying bond of sympathy, deeply valued by both. Somehow Kerrigan understood why Clancy wanted nothing over him but the sky at a time like that. "You could hardly go so far as to say you've got religion, though, Pete," he argued. Kerrigan's own creed was a matter of hereditary loyalty, but he considered himself perfectly orthodox.

"You wouldn't call it that, I suppose." Peter was half laughing, half serious. "I haven't any banner to carry or even a tag to pin on my manly breast, but I've come to believe—certain things." His eyes moved slowly, almost unseeingly, around the big, fashionable restaurant where he was entertaining his two friends. "I've seen so much—of the way things work—that I don't believe in coincidences any more. I mean I don't think that it just happens that I've been here or there or the other place. The stars don't just happen not to bump into each other . . . . They follow a

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law. If we could see far enough,—if we had sufficient intelligence, I believe we'd find that nothing is accidental . . . . . that everything is the result—and the cause—of something else."

"Oh, rats," said Trant, irreverently. "You can't make that hold water, Pete. It was only by chance, for instance, that we met last night and that you asked me and Jake here to dinner. If I'd walked down the other side of Forty-second Street . . . ."

"But you didn't," said Clancy, with a frown and a smile. "So that's that. How about endive and roquefort? And what kind of dessert will you have? If Ray's going to catch that train for Pondicherry and try to spot some more of those bogus hundred-dollar bills he's so worried about, we'll have to make it a little more snappy."

The waiter, with the air of being intimately concerned in the matter of their choice, graciously admitted that it was a good one, and the dinner proceeded.

Kerrigan, who had not previously heard the nature of the Secret Service man's quest, made enquiries and Trant proceeded to enlighten him. A marvellously executed counterfeit one hundred dollar bill had recently made its appearance, and the Bureau was hot on its trail. Seven notes only had been confiscated and five of these had been traced—in one instance immediately and in the other remotely—to widely separated race tracks.

"As you know, a place like that, where money in wads changes hands so fast, is a bully good place to pass the 'queer,'" said Trant, warming to his subject. "The bookmakers are pretty wise, but this note would pass in almost any bank. In fact it was just by luck that the teller at the Case National caught the last bill."

"There you go. Luck," said Peter. "The teller had probably been trained for years, so that he'd practically developed a sixth sense, and you call it luck!"

He spoke rather absently. For several minutes he had

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been watching a table in the corner, some little distance away. He already knew the greater part of Trant's story of the spurious notes and was hardly listening.

The Secret Service man, glancing toward him, realized suddenly that he might be boring his host. "She's a peach all right, Pete," he broke off to say as he followed the direction of Clancy's eye. "Looks as if she'd just come from Sunnybrook Farm. Wonder how anything as fresh and young as that can stand this burg."

"She likes it," said Peter readily. "She just told him so."

"Oh, come off. You couldn't hear that far," Trant retorted.

"No, but that's what she said," Peter asserted. "Would you like to know her name?"

"She's a friend of yours, Pete?" Kerrigan had to twist sidewise away from the round table to get a glimpse of the girl in question. His companions were practically facing the mirrored corner.

"Never laid eyes on her before, but her name is Marie. At least he just asked if he could call her that. He looks to me like a fast worker."

"Has Pete gone nutty, Jake?"

"No," grinned Kerrigan. "He's just showing off. Cashing in on that deaf and dumb case he had once. Didn't he ever tell you about that?"

"No. What do you mean?"

"Tell him, Pete."

"Happened after I left the Secret Service," said Peter. "Too long a story to tell you now, Ray. I had to be in that asylum for several weeks and I made hay while the sun shone. Comes in pretty handy now and then."

"What does? Do you mean—at this distance——"

"It isn't much of a trick in a good light." Peter spoke with becoming modesty but was half conscious that his boyish vanity was being tickled by the expression of Ray's face. "Lip-reading. That's all. Once you get the hang of it——"

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"But do you mean to tell me you can understand what that girl's saying!"

"Sure can," said Peter, "and also what her handsome young friend is saying to her. Which is a plenty, if you ask me."

"You mean you can read his lips in the mirror?"

"Why not?"

"Pshaw, I don't believe it."

"You don't have to."

"What did he say just now when he nearly put his chest into his plate, Pete?" Kerrigan didn't mind a bit of stage management in his friend's behalf.

"I didn't quite get it all," admitted Peter. "You two were talking. He said something about eyes and stars and that sort of truck."

"I could invent that much without causing my imagination an inconvenient strain," Trant objected. "You can't prove it."

"Not unless you want to go over and ask if you, too, can call her Marie," chuckled Peter. "Or wait. I dare you to go over right now and ask her if she knows Mr. John Oliver Olmstead. Come. I couldn't make that name up, could I? Could I, Ray? Why, what in heaven's name's the matter?"

"Have I been talking in my sleep?" Trant's sleek dark head was thrust forward. "I don't remember telling you——"

"What?" Kerrigan asked eagerly. He seemed to be laboring under some sudden excitement.

"John Oliver Olmstead," Trant repeated, just above his breath. "The girl didn't really say that, Pete, did she? You're having me on."

"She really did say—" Peter's face had grown serious —" 'I haven't seen your Mr. John Oliver Olmstead yet. I'm anxious to meet him.' Why do you care? What is it to you? Who is this John Oliver Olmstead?"

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"Don't you know, Pete?" Kerrigan put in in a low tone. "He's the head of a very fine photogravure concern on Thirtieth Street. In that old building that belongs to the Wellmouth Estate. Just off Fifth Avenue."

"I know the building of course, but I didn't remember—" Peter stopped and glanced from the two young people in the corner to the Secret Service man who was hastily looking at his watch. "Wait a second, Ray," he said. "Why does that name ring a bell with you?" His keen, steel-blue eye searched the other's face.

"It's just a very odd coincidence—" Trant frowned and glanced aside as he rose.

"Coincidence?" said Peter with a quizzical, curious smile.

"Of course it's only that." Trant sounded almost angry. "He redeemed the bill all right and asked to keep it as a souvenir, but the teller wouldn't let him."

"You mean Olmstead did this?"

"It's all confidential, Pete, and I shouldn't have said this much. I didn't mean to mention any names. I was afraid I had when you sprung it. You'll let it go no further, old man, of course."

"Naturally," said Peter, lifting his hand to summon the waiter. "Check, please."

"It's later than I thought," said Trant hastily. "I'll miss my train if I don't hurry. You'll excuse me, won't you, Pete? It's been great seeing you once more and old Jake too. Thanks for the corking dinner. Good bye, old scout."

He held out his hand. Kerrigan gripped it hard, and pulled the younger man down so that he could speak to him closely in the ear.

"Has the Bureau any suspicions about this fellow Olmstead?" he whispered. "Are they keeping in touch with him?"

"Not that I know of," muttered Trant. "I understand he's off on a business trip just now."

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"Oh, he is?"

"That's what the girl at the office said. He's gone to St. Louis, I believe. Why are you so curious, Jake? Any reason?"

"No," said Kerrigan, looking slowly up at Peter. "It—it just struck me as a—curious coincidence—like you said."

"Good Lord! I'll have to dash," cried Trant.

"Tell us the rest of the bed-time story when you get back," urged Kerrigan. "Don't fail to look us up."

"I won't," said Trant, turning to lift his hand in salute. "Great luck I happened to meet you, Pete. Adios and thanks. Adios, Jake."

"Adios means 'go with God'," said Peter as he motioned aside the little silver tray with its heap of silver change. The waiter grinned his acknowledgment of the sentiment and the tip. Kerrigan's face was extremely grave as he followed Peter from the room. They had to pass very near the small table in the corner. The two young people had nearly finished their dinner. She was a charming little thing, with amazingly large and candid blue eyes, a neat, determined nose, two red lips—coral not lip-stick red—a mass of soft dark hair and exquisite neck and shoulders above a very pretty evening frock of gentian blue. Peter, who had an eye for detail of every sort noted these items various, as well as those appertaining to her escort, who might well have been taken for an exemplar of "What the extremely, not to say extravagantly, well-dressed man will wear."

As they stopped at the check-room just outside the door, Kerrigan muttered something that Peter failed to catch, for his attention had again been attracted to the small table in the corner of the dining room. Two people had just come in from the opposite entrance, and in passing had stopped to speak to the occupants of that particular table. The small drama that followed was clear in its implication, even if it had not been possible for Peter to lip-read some of the short colloquy.

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The man at the table rose as the late comers paused beside it. It was the ordinary gesture of civilization, but Peter felt that even a savage from the deepest wilds of unmapped jungle would have been driven to make some motion of obeisance in recognition of such beauty as now flashed and glowed before him. A golden girl—but not the dead gold of coined metal. Rather it was the deep, pulsing glow of yellow flame, incalculable, dangerous. Sharp waves of crisply flowing hair that caught the light; a sheath of metallic gauze decorating a lithe, slender body that oscillated softly, ceaslessly, almost imperceptibly, but was never quite still. There was a tinge of gold in the clear pallor of the skin, in the thick brows and lashes, and (though Peter was not near enough to see) flecks of gold in the pale hazel of her eyes.

They were flashing now as she looked at the man who had risen to face her. Their eyes were nearly level though he was above the medium in height.

"I begin to understand your sudden devotion to business, George."

Peter made that sentence out though he could not be sure of the names as the two girls were presented to each other. Marie La—— something. Perhaps Lamont. Probably Lamont. And the other name had a Van in it. First name began with S. What was the name of the Van Zandt heiress? Sylvia? No. But surely something that began with——

Kerrigan touched Peter's arm. "Come away, lad. I want to have a talk with you."

"Yes," said Peter, absently taking his coat, hat and stick from the check girl. "What is it, Jake? Something important?" His eyes were still on the table in the corner. The second man, a fairly tall, square shouldered young fellow, with a plain rather pleasant face, was being polite to Marie—La—probably Lamont. Peter judged from their manner that they had met before.

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"Where are you going from here, Pete?" Kerrigan's voice in his ear had an urgent note.

"Home," said Peter. "Why?" His glance shifted swiftly to the grave face of the police detective.

"Will you be busy? Could I come along?"

"Why, certainly, Jake. What's troubling you?"

"I didn't think it was anything, and now I'm not so sure," growled Kerrigan. "Anyhow, I'd like you to hear the story for yourself. This coincidence business, Pete. You were serious about what you said?"

"Yes."

"Well then it seems—kind of—as if you ought to be in on this. Olmstead's name cropping up so funny. And that trip to St. Louis . . . . ."

"Whatever are you talking about, Jake? What's on your mind?"

"I can't tell you here. It's a long story and there may be nothing to it. But I'd like you to hear it first hand. I'll have to phone Sheehan to meet us at your place. Will you wait here?"

Peter's eyes narrowed. "I'll be delighted," he said and Kerrigan went hastily away. After a thoughtful second Peter's glance went back to the table in the corner. The golden girl had turned away. As she crossed the room, all eyes followed her including those of Marie La—probably Lamont, whose delicately rounded face was painfully flushed. Her companion said something to her—and smiled with a dazzling flash of white teeth. She responded with an odd little daring lift of the chin, and they both rose and came toward the entrance.

Before they reached it, however, Peter following an obscure but imperative instinct, had turned hastily away. The girl's bright low laughter, like the tinkling of little bells, was ringing softly in his ears as he intercepted Kerrigan at the intersection of the halls.

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CHAPTER IV

"MAY I light it for you, sir?" Wiggar's face was as devoid of expression as a deal table. He brought the flame of a very elegant small lighter into—one might have thought shuddering—contact with a dark and damaged briar pipe, and stepped back two paces.

Many a strange guest had Peter Clancy's butler-valet served, but none, perhaps, more incongruous with his surroundings than the wiry little man who, perched on the edge of his chair, now took a long pull at his pipe and regarded his host and Chief of Detectives Kerrigan, with sparkling little eyes that flashed like bits of mirror set in rugged gray moss. A hairy little man it was indeed. Although the leathery cheeks, the long upper lip and spade-like chin were almost painfully clean shaven, his eyebrows were so thick and broad as to suggest some kind of fur, and his curly gray head appeared to have been roughly thatched with such a wealth of material as to leave over the two thick little tufts that were disposed of in his ears. He was dressed in a clumsy, ill fitting suit of blue, slightly too large for him and much too thick for the temperature of the room. He mopped his face and the back of his neck and glanced aside at the small open fire in the grate.

"Whew," he said, grinning, "it's as hot in here as me own furnace room, and I couldn't say you no fairer nor that." He shrugged his shoulders with the instinctive impatience of one unaccustomed to hampering garments.

"Perhaps Mr. Sheehan would be more comfortable with his coat off," suggested Peter, pleasantly.

The little man was about to comply joyfully with Peter's suggestion when he caught Wiggar's eye.

"Perhaps you'd care to have the window open, Mr. Peter,"

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the valet remarked with a look at Sheehan that almost froze him where he sat. "Quite so, sir. Thank you, sir."

He advanced majestically to the farthest one of the long windows, opened it a little way, and returned to his former inconspicuous position. His master had not dismissed him, therefore it was obvious that he was intended to hear what was about to transpire. One never knew what service might be required, and other things being equal, it was always well to keep oneself informed.

"You can go ahead with your story, Terence," said Kerrigan with a side glance at Peter. "Tell it to Mr. Clancy the same as you told it to me."

"Oho! So that's it! I thought as much. You do be placing some dependence on my words now, Mister Kerrigan." The little old man's shrewd eyes flicked quickly from the police detective's face to that of Peter Clancy and back again.

"Of course I knew all the time that you were speaking the truth, Terence," said Kerrigan, hastily, "but I thought your inferences were wrong. That's all. You see, Clancy, Sheehan's people and mine came from the same little town in Ireland——"

"Yes," the older man interrupted, "and I've known Jake since he used to sneak into my cellar and hide from his mother's hair brush which she had no intent to be wasting the soft side of it on his head, you may believe me, and never a thump or a wallop to his hinder-parts would have been undeserved in them days, Mr. Clancy, you can take it from one who knows the truth and speaks it himself on occasion."

"As I was just saying," soothed Kerrigan, "so go ahead, Terence. Tell Mr. Clancy what you told me. And you can say what you like before Wiggar," he added, noting Sheehan's swift glance behind him. "I bet you never spilled a bean in your entire life. Did you, Wiggar?"

"Beans, sir, of course, present no difficulty," the valet responded gravely. "Wine—soup—in the hands of a care-

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less person are, perhaps, a menace. I hope I have never been guilty in any of these directions, or in the matter of the purely idiomatic sense in which, if I am not mistaken, you have employed the word beans."

Peter could never be certain as to what was going on behind that colorless wooden mask. No least twinkle in the pale eyes betrayed him, but somehow the master felt that his own inward chuckle was but an echo of something deeply hidden in the "innard workings" of this most perfect of servants. Anyone else would have considered the Briton merely a solemn ass, and the keen perceptions behind that noncommital exterior would have passed unguessed. Terence Sheehan, whose own sense of humor was irrepressible, looked down—or rather up—his own short nose with an almost pitying scorn but, under Kerrigan's eye, forebore a remark that was on the tip of his tongue, and plunged eagerly into his story.

"You see it's this way, sir." He addressed himself to Peter, and his queer little face was filled with anxiety, determination, and a kind of awe and fear. "The boss, you know. Mr. Jack. What say? Yes, sir, Mr. Jack Olmstead."

"You work for him?" Peter asked, quickly.

"Didn't Jake tell you?"

"No. He said you would."

"Right. I will. I'm furnace man for the John Oliver Olmstead Company. I've been with 'em in Mr. Jack Olmstead's father's time, and with Mr. Jack himself ever since the old gentleman died and his son took over the business. It's a matter of thirty-one years come next January. So you can see it's more to me what comes to the lad than it would be to these fly-by-night janitors that changes jobs every time they get sore about what somebody says or doesn't say."

"The janitor at your place left suddenly?" asked Peter, jumping at conclusions.

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Terence Sheehan blinked. "How was you after guessing that? But so it was. And that's how it does be that I come to know what I know, and putting two and two together, and pondering this way and that, I thinks to myself I'll step up to Jake's and lay the facts before him and ease my fears and anxieties, if so be that I may." His voice had dropped. He glanced apprehensively about and edged forward on his chair.

"When was this?" Peter's eyes were keen and encouraging.

"The thing that's been worrying me, sir, happened well over a week ago. Friday, the thirteenth. I'll never forget that day, it's me that's telling you."

"Well go ahead. Tell us," urged Kerrigan. "What's hindering you? You went down early to the building, because you had to sweep up and get things tidy and tend to your furnace. Come to the point, Terry. We want this picture all in one reel. Don't try to make a serial out of it."

"Let him tell it his own way, Jake," said Peter, quietly. "We have all the time there is."

"Thank you, sir," said Terence with a withering glance at Kerrigan. "The lad was always impatient. It's farther he'd have gotten in his profession if he'd stopped to listen to them that's older and be-like wiser than himself. If I'd told these here facts to you, sir, now maybe you'd have listened and so much time wouldn't have been wasted."

Kerrigan heaved a sigh, reversed the crossing of his legs and took out another cigar. He was about to bite off the end when it was gently but firmly taken from him, the closed bit neatly pinched off, the cigar handed back and lighted and Wiggar had returned to his place without having made one unnecessary gesture or the least noise. The flow of Sheehan's words had not been for an instant interrupted. He was warming to his subject.

"As Jake says, I come early to the place that morning.

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Of course I have my own key and I went down at once to look at my fire, it having come on very cold in the night as perhaps you remember. It was the beginning of those first three very cold days we had."

Peter nodded.

"The minute I got inside the door I smelled a funny smell. Maybe it's easier smelling up than down, if you get what I mean. Anyway I says to myself, somebody's been putting trash and maybe garbage in your furnace, Terry, and if it's that boy Mike you can give him an earful for me. Mike comes down and toasts hot dogs over the coals at lunch time like we all used to do when Mr. Jack was a kid and begun to work for his dad. Times is different now, with these here cafeterias every second door. Mike's the only one that comes down from upstairs, so that's why I thought of him. He isn't a bad boy, really, but I couldn't think who else might have put something in the fire that would be kicking up that kind of a smell. It got worse when I got down to it and the furnace room was hottern hell, saving your presence, sir. I went over quick to see what was the matter, and there didn't seem to be anything wrong except that the drafts had been left on and the coals was low in the fire-box. I was surprised at that, because while she's an old bird that furnace is good. I know her like I know my own wife. I remember fixing her all up for the night. Lots of coal, and fine stuff on the top. Ordinarily she'd keep like that all night in the coldest weather."

"What about the drafts?" Peter asked. "Can you be sure you turned them off?"

"That's the point I'm coming to, sir." Again Sheehan wiped his brow, glanced aside at Wiggar, shrugged his coat away from the back of his neck, leaned forward and went on quickly.

"I would have swore I shut them drafts. I'm sure now that I did, but despite it all, I'm not just certain. You see

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I was terrible mad because that swine of a janitor had gone off and left us flat. Mr. Jack called me up to the office and asked me to take over till they could get somebody else. He said he was going to St. Louis on the mid-night train."

The little man stopped short. His tiny bright eyes bored into Peter's. He edged so far forward that the back legs of his chair left the floor.

"What I want to know, Mr. Clancy, sir," he said in a low hissing voice, "is did Mr. Jack ever get to St. Louis? And how and why and when did he leave his office that night? That's what I want to know! That's what somebody ought to make it their business to find out."

"Tell me why you think he didn't go to St. Louis." Peter's frowning gravity was encouragement in itself.

"Tell him what you thought you saw in the furnace, Terry," prompted Kerrigan.

"I'll tell Mr. Clancy what I know I saw," retorted Sheehan. "As soon as I opened the furnace door I noticed it. You know how hard it is to burn up wool, sir, and also how it smells. Well there was a kind of a lump of something." He winced and his face was white. "I struck it with the poker and it fell apart. I thought it was only the burned out remainders of woolen cloth. Maybe it was just that—and nothing—else . . . I hadn't been upstairs then, mind you, so I wasn't thinking so much about it. I knew if I was to save the fire I'd better get on the job right away, so I stoked up the old bird for keeps . . . and then I went upstairs."

"To the office floor," Kerrigan put in as Sheehan paused once more.

"To the bosses office first." The older man corrected the statement with anxious urgency. "It was the place to start cleaning up anyway, but it seems to me now as if something told me to go there as quick as I could."

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"That's your imagination, Terry. Mr. Clancy just wants facts."

"And who are you, Jake Kerrigan," Sheehan retorted hotly, "that's to say what's facts and what is not? Ain't a thought just as good a fact as the big foot that you're always putting into the middle of an argument? Wasn't the telephone and the radio once just a thought in somebody's mind? Didn't somebody just imagine——"

"Sure, Terry, sure. You're right," Kerrigan interrupted soothingly. "So something told you to hurry up and get to the bosses office, and there you found——"

"I found the place all upset, Mr. Clancy," exclaimed Sheehan, too intent on his story to argue further. "Chairs was thrown about. A glass was smashed on the floor. The drawers of Mr. Jack's desk was all open and the papers scattered, hither and yon."

"Were the locks broken?" Peter asked, quickly.

"No, sir."

"Mightn't it have meant only that Mr. Olmstead was careless and had been in a hurry to pack what he wanted to take away with him. Knowing that you were the one who would clean his office, Sheehan, he would have been sure everything in it was safe."

"That's true enough, sir," agreed the little man. "And it's what Jake and the others would be pointing out. But there's more to it than that." With a stern face, he put his hand in his pocket, drew out a small parcel, carefully wrapped, and balanced it on his knee. "Mr. Ingalls and young Mr. Harden went all over the bosses papers and things in his office. They're sure that nothing was missing and maybe they're right. But how do they know? I ask you that, sir. If a thing isn't in a place, how do you know it had ought to be, when maybe you never knew it was there in the first place at all? Answer me that. And how can

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you explain my finding these, after I went down to see was my fires o. k.?"

Slowly the little man rose and went over to the table beside which Peter sat. He placed the packet before his host, and with a queer, bitter gesture of the outflung hand said, "Open it, you, sir. Maybe you won't be quite so glib with your explanation as Jake was. Maybe you'll see what I see—something—wrong." His voice dropped to a whisper. "Something dead—dead wrong."

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CHAPTER V

THE crackle of the stiff paper sounded loud in the ensuing stillness. Peter laid aside the three rubber bands that had held it in place and delicately, with the tips of his fingers, pressed back the folds and exposed the contents of the package to view.

Three inconsiderable items. A smallish lump of gray metallic substance that had been rubbed clean but still showed flecks of foreign matter inbedded in it. A few inches of what might have been a piece of pipe—except that no piping, whether made of clay or metal would, conceivably, have been charred like that, for it was burned black and was at the very point of disintergration. The third object showed no signs of having, literally, been through the fire, but it was damaged—broken—crushed. A flat pencil holder of gold with a ring at the top but no chain. It was meant to contain one of those flat lead pencils, the kind that Wiggar insisted on Peter's using, because they did not cause an unseemly bulge in a waistcoat pocket. There was, however, no pencil in the holder, the flat sides of which were crushed together until, at the open end, they almost met.

Breathing heavily, Terence Sheehan reached out and turned the small golden object the other side up. Plainly marked upon the surface were the initials J. O. O., and in smaller script the abbreviation, Jr.

For several minutes Peter gazed upon this odd collection with a concentration so intense that his whole body appeared perfectly rigid. At length he lifted his eyes and looked across at Kerrigan. There was neither wonder nor criticism in his level voice.

"So you passed all this up, Jake?" he said.

"Yes." Kerrigan spoke defensively. "And so would

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you, Pete, if— Go on, Terry. Tell him the rest. He'll see why it was only reasonable I didn't get excited."

"Oh, reasonable! You and your reason," exclaimed Sheehan, with scornful impatience. "Listen, Mr. Clancy. Let me go on with my story, and see after all do you wonder I'm afraid something's happened to the lad—for Mr. Jack's still a lad to me, sir, though he must be nearly as old as what Jake is."

"And able to take care of himself, you can be sure of that," growled Kerrigan.

"How do you know he is?" Terence rounded on the police detective. "How do you know there ain't some plot —some devil's work afoot? I tell you the way his office was mussed up wasn't reasonable—unless there'd been some kind of hell to pay there. I think so now—and I thought so then when I first seen it, like I just told you. The minute I come into the room and saw the way things was I thought it was a case for the police, but naturally I didn't want to go beyond my rights in the matter, so I started to call young Mr. Harden. I had the receiver off the hook before I remembered he'd gone off for over Sunday. So then I tried to get Mr. Ingalls and I did get his apartment but he'd spent the night somewhere else., Being pretty well fussed up by that time, not liking for to think the thing was up to me, I'd about made up my mind to ask Jake for some of the perfessional advice he finds it so hard to part with, when it come over me, what with this and that, I'd give my furnace more than enough time to burn herself up and if I didn't get down to her quick and shut her off I wouldn't have no fire. I hoped maybe Mr. Ingalls would come in early like he sometimes does——"

"Mr. Ingalls," Peter put in as Sheehan stopped for breath. "He's the Manager?"

"The General Manager. Next to the boss. Yes, sir."

"Is his first name George?" Peter asked quickly, and receiving a surprised affirmative he nodded and waved the mat-

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ter aside. "Good. Go on Sheehan. You dashed down to see about the furnace——"

"Yes, sir." The little man drew a panting breath as if he had that minute hastened back to his duties. "Up to that time, you understand, Mr. Clancy, robbery was the worst thing that was in my mind. I hustled down to the cellar, and although I most generally keep one light burning there, and the one was on at the time, it didn't, somehow seem enough, with all the dark corners there do be in an old building of that sort, so I puts on all the lights there was as I come along. There's quite a good bunch, for Mr. Jack had them put in himself, and the place was light as day. Naturally I went to the furnace as quick as I could——"

He stopped and pointed, with a knotted finger that was not quite steady, at the flattened pencil holder.

"That was lying on the floor right in front, or almost right in front of the furnace. I knew the minute I seen it what it was and whose it was. But how it come there? Believe you me that was something else again! How could it of come there, Mr. Clancy? Answer me that. They all sidestep it. They say this and that. And I'm asking you! Mr. Jack always carried that. There's no one in the place hasn't seen it a hundred times. Years ago he used to wear it on his watch chain, but after he'd been to the big war he'd throwed away his chain and wore his watch on his wrist like you do. Just the same he kept that little gold pencil. He used to brag about how he'd never lost it—not once in so many years. If you asked him a question, out would come his little pencil. A great one for figuring he was. 'Put a pencil to it, Terry,' he used to say to me, when I'd be asking his advice. 'Write it all down,' he'd say, 'and then you can see where you'll be at'."

"You saw a good deal of him?" Peter asked quickly. "Did he ever come down into the cellar, for instance?"

"Well, of course when he was a lad he did, and once in a long time he'd drop down, kind like, or because something

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needed fixing—the plumbing or that—you have to watch an old building. But if you mean was he in my furnace room recently, I can tell you truly he was not."

"I told him he couldn't be sure of that, Pete." Kerrigan leaned across the table to make his point. "How does he know Mr. Olmstead didn't go down there that night, before he went to take the train. He might have wanted to—to burn—something . . . and have dropped his pencil. If he put his foot on it, as seems likely, he wouldn't have seen it, and if he missed it later he probably would have no idea where he dropped it."

"Exactly where was that, Sheehan? Can you tell me?" Peter asked. He had nodded at Kerrigan's explanation but had kept his eyes fixed on the working face of the old Irishman.

"You know how the bottom door of a furnace extends out onto the floor, sir?" Sheehan drew three sides of a small rectangle with his stubby finger on the polished mahogany of the table, and indicated the wall of the furnace by continuing the line out to the right instead of carrying it to the left which would have closed the square. "This angle here. Quite close in. That's where I found it."

"Mum-m-m," said Peter. "It was mashed like this when you first saw it?"

"Just as you see, sir."

"Could you have stepped on it yourself, maybe? You'd already opened drafts and put on coal. The light, apparently, at that time wasn't too good. Don't you think it might have been yourself that did the damage?"

"No, sir." Sheehan spoke emphatically. "I didn't have to go on that side at all. The coal is to the left. And of course I'd not have to go that close in, nor would anyone want to with the furnace as hot as what I found it."

"Didn't you have to close or change the drafts? They were on, you said. If the fire was so hot wouldn't you have shut it down?"

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"It's easy to see you don't work much around furnaces, sir," said Sheehan, earnestly. (Wiggar thought, sardonically, as he looked at his own perfect and immaculate handiwork, that this was truth at least.) "You must leave the drafts open for a little while after you put on fresh coal. I'd left the drafts just as they was—all open. I'd shook her down, but the shaker is at the left and I hadn't touched the bottom door, which, you understand, you don't have to open except when you take out ashes."

"Then how do you figure that the pencil case came there, Sheehan?" Peter's man-to-man attitude and tone of respect were well calculated to inspire confidence and elicit confidences.

Terence reached back between his legs, drew up a small chair that was just behind him and seating himself beside the table, rested his arms upon it. His voice was low and full of horror as he said: "I can think of just but the one way, sir. It's been haunting me day and night ever since the boss didn't come back. And even before that, as you might say right along from the start. Look you, Mr. Clancy, he called me up to his office—about Chris Olsen, the lazy lout, going off without a day's notice. He says, just like I'm telling you, 'Terry,' he said, 'can you carry on until I get back, or shall I get Mr. Ingalls to hire a new janitor?' 'How long will you be gone Mr. Jack?' says I, and he says it's only a flying trip; that he'll surely be back by Thursday."

"Last Thursday? The nineteenth?"

"Yes, Mr. Clancy. Last Thursday, as ever was. He told me with his own lips that he had to be back in New York by then. Some important business. He didn't say what. And here it is the Tuesday after and no word yet!"

"That's wrong, Terry. He's off his nut, Pete—at least about that. There've been two telegrams."

"Oh, yes," Sheehan agreed, hastily, "but that was just at first. There's been nothing since——"

"There was a wire he sent from the train," Kerrigan said

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impatiently. "And another after he got to St. Louis. Terry has just gone hay-wire, Pete. He has it in his head that—that somebody had made 'way with Mr. Olmstead and burned —well—some things—in his furnace."

"That fire was hot enough to burn *anything.*" Sheehan bit the lip that he had drawn down across his teeth. "It did darn near blister my face when I grabbed up that little pencil thing of Mr. Jack's. You can guess what I felt like, sir. The way his office looked . . . that bunch of woolen cloth . . . . I could still smell it. Seems as if I could never stop smelling it . . . . and then that little bit of shiny gold that was most as much a part of Mr. Jack as his own hand . . . . lying there where it could easily have fell out of his pocket—if—if——" A heavy shudder shook him. He groaned and covered his face with his hands.

Peter frowned. His eyes were veiled as he looked down at the rough gray head. Kerrigan could see that his confrere was taking the matter very seriously. He was about to insist again upon the impossibility of the horror that Terence imagined, when Peter spoke.

"What did you do, Terry, when you saw what it was—this bit of gold?" His voice was very kind and sympathetic.

"Do? I went wild! Yes, sir. I went clean off my head." The face that Sheehan raised did not belie his words. "I thought, my God! And straight away I went at them ashes! I thought there'd be something—there'd be—something, and I dug 'em out as careful as if there was a chance —I mean as if it would mean anything to him—if what I thought——"

He could not go on. Peter said quietly: "You found nothing but this bit of bone——"

"You think it is bone, sir?" Sheehan interrupted. His haggard face was gray.

"It could hardly be anything but bone, but it could quite easily have belonged—to some animal. It's much more than probable that it did. Remember that and keep your courage

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up. Now, what do you make of this little lump of something that you salvaged It looks as if it might be silver . . ."

"It is silver, Mr. Clancy. I took it to a fella I know that's in the assay business. Pure silver. And I ask you, sir, how that much fine silver got into my furnace?"

"You have an idea about that yourself," Peter said, quickly. "What is it?"

"I can only think of one thing." The old man gnawed at the side of his finger, and tapped his teeth with it as he spoke. "Mr. Jack carried his keys on a long silver chain. It might make up maybe that amount of silver. You'd see him take his keys out of his pants pocket and whirl them about at the end of the chain whilst he was talking to you. I mind he did that very thing the last time I ever seen him alive."

"Oh, Terry, you make me tired," Kerrigan rapped out. "Didn't I point out to you when you blew in Sunday night, all het up about this business, that a man doesn't telegraph from the place he's going to, half way across the United States, on Friday morning——"

"He wasn't in St. Louis Friday morning," corrected Sheehan, with heat. "It was from the train came the message Friday."

"Let me get this straight," said Peter. "Do I understand that Mr. Olmstead wired his office twice?"

"Yes." "Yes, sir." The two Irishmen spoke together.

"Who received the messages, Terence? Do you know?" Peter asked hastily.

"Sure. I was in the office when the first one come. And I was so glad I—I——"

"Was it delivered by hand, or did it come over the wire?" Peter pretended not to notice the little man's agitation.

"It was phoned in."

"To whom?"

"Mr. Ingalls took it. Right then. Right when he and Mr. Harden was looking to see was anything missing in

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Mr. Jack's office. After I'd showed them—those things." Sheehan motioned to the three small objects upon which the lamp on the table seemed to focus its rays.

"Do you remember—or did you hear the wording of the telegram?"

"I didn't hear the words. Mr. Ingalls said—'What? Oh. Good!' Like that. 'Good!' he said again and then he jumped up from the phone and he says, 'It's all right, Terry, my boy. Whatever's happened you don't have to worry about your boss. He's just wired from the train for you not to forget, Barry——' Barry is Mr. Harden, the secretary, and the message was about some kind of business that I didn't know nothing about of course, but they understood it; so that seemed o. k. and I was that glad I went down to my furnace room, and took out the wee small bottle I keep there in case I need it, and I had a small drink all to myself."

"I don't blame you for that," said Peter, "but I guess I'm a bit mixed. I understood you to say that Mr. Harden was out of town for the week-end."

"I only thought he was," Sheehan corrected himself. "He came in almost as soon as Mr. Ingalls did."

"Why did you think he was going to be away?"

"He told me so himself. He's a nice lad and often stops to pass the time of day when we encounters each other."

"The secretary, I think you said? Do you mean a private secretary—or belonging to the company?"

"I never thought about that. It's on the letter paper, though. John Oliver Olmstead, president, and young Mr. Harden, secretary."

"Then he's an officer of the company," said Peter, in a matter of fact tone. "Did he happen to tell you why he changed his mind?"

"About coming back? No. Believe me I'd other things to think about at that time, you can take it from me."

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"Were the two young men very much worried when you told them your tale?" asked Peter.

"At first they sure were, but when the message came and they couldn't find that anything was missing out of Mr. Jack's office, they said it must be o. k. and he'd probably be able to tell us about the pencil and all when he got back. But he hasn't come, Mr. Clancy. He hasn't come. He said Thursday. And this is the Tuesday after."

"But there shouldn't be any cause for alarm," said Peter, kindly. "A man would think nothing of staying away that long."

"He'd important business. He told me so himself," Sheehan reiterated "And they've had no word to say why he doesn't come back I've asked every day I don't know if I ought to try can I get a man to take that shifty Swede's place, so every day I go up and clean things up a bit and ask what shall I do about it And every day they say wait, since Mr. Olmstead told me to do that. 'He'll be back soon. Don't worry,' Mr. Ingalls says. He told me about the telegram from St. Louis Monday, the day it came. But there's been nothing since. Nothing. Nothing. And those bits of things," he flung out his hand in a passionate gesture, "from me own furnace staring me in the face. Jake laughed at me Sunday, Mr. Clancy. He said of course Mr. Olmstead had maybe gone on a bit of a bender and hadn't bothered to report back home. But I don't believe it. I don't believe he ever left New York. What I do believe is this, sir. And thank God I've got someone to listen to me that takes me serious.

"I think Jack Olmstead was done away with, that night in his own office, and that it was not him—but his murderers that sent in those telegrams!"

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CHAPTER VI

SLOWLY Peter lifted his eyes to Kerrigan's face. Earnestly the two detectives regarded each other for a long minute. Terence Sheehan looked expectantly from one to the other.

"It's that you need Mr. Clancy to tell you this is a dangerous and serious business, Jake." There was reproof in the old man's tone. "You think there's something in what I'm saying, don't you, sir?"

"There may be," said Peter, slowly. "You see, Sheehan, Jake has been getting very uneasy in his mind. That's why he asked you to come down and tell him the story all over again. You see we—accidentally——" he smiled at the word—"learned something to-night that puts a rather different face on the whole thing. I believe Jake feels as I do that it would be just as well to go into matters a little deeper."

"Sure I do—now," agreed Kerrigan.

"How would you like to have me look in on you in the morning, Terry? Could I do it without attracting attention? Is there a direct entrance from the cellar to the street?" asked Peter, in a business tone.

Sheehan's little eyes showed relief and rising excitement. "Would you do that, Mr. Clancy? Sure that would be fine. If I could feel something was being done——"

"There's no way in without going through the building, is there, Terry?" put in Kerrigan. "I was there once to see you, but I don't remember any."

"You came in the front way," said Sheehan eagerly. "That's the regular way I do be using myself, and all the rest the same. Only Mr. Etherington. He comes through

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from the back and we ought to be able to fix it so you could, too, Mr. Clancy."

"From the back? Your building doesn't run through to Twenty-ninth Street, does it?" asked Kerrigan.

"No, but the estate does. The Wellmouth Estate. Don't tell me you don't know about that, Jake, me lad, with half the world trying to horn in on the inheritance now that old Miss Wellmouth has died."

"Oh, of course I know," retorted Kerrigan. "And as well I know that your old building belongs to them. What I didn't know was that the Wellmouths owned through to the other street, or that your building and the one behind it had any connection."

"Well, at that, they have and they haven't," said Sheehan. "We've got a world-without-end kind of a lease, and our building has been kept up pretty good by Mr. Jack and his father before him. But the other place, the one on Twenty-ninth Street, has been let for this and that, and I guess Mr. Etherington is the only tenant that's stuck. Neither would he have stayed if it hadn't been so handy-like, and being there so long he's got used to it and maybe likes it. But if I had to walk past all that white statuary, nights and all, to get into the street, it wouldn't be suiting my fancy and I'm here to state the fact."

"What does he mean by statuary?" asked Peter, glancing up at Kerrigan. "Wait! I know. I have it now. It's that antique place with the gates, just back of the Schuyler Memorial. Twenty-ninth and Thirtieth. I see. The Olmstead concern is on Thirtieth. One of the employees lives in this place on Twenty-ninth Street. And there's a connection at the back you say, Sheehan? That sounds very promising. How do I find my way in?"

"Suppose I was to tip Mr. Etherington off," the old man suggested, eagerly.

"Mr. Etherington." Peter repeated the name. "That wouldn't be the Mr. Thomas Etherington I used to know?"

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"No, sir. Ours is named Nathaniel. He's a real old man, too old to be a friend of yourn."

"I like old men," smiled Peter, "but this evidently isn't the same. What does Mr. Nathaniel Etherington do?"

"He a fine engraver, sir. The best they come. Old Mr. Olmstead was that proud of the work he done he used to brag about it to anyone that would listen. He was the highest paid of anybody in the shop in the old gentleman's time, but now that they do so much with machinery and chemicals and the like, I guess there's not so much work for him. Not but what Mr. Jack will always keep—would always have kept——" Sheehan stopped and swallowed hard.

"Have you said anything to Mr. Etherington about your fears in regard to Mr. Olmstead?" Peter spoke with kindly gravity.

"No, sir. Him and me ain't just what you might call in-*tim*-it, sir. But I think he'd do anything he could for Mr. Jack. Shan't I see him and put him wise about showing you the way in?"

"Hum-m-m" said Peter, softly. "I'm not so sure. If we could manage it between ourselves, just for the present, until we have a chance to size things up, Terence, perhaps we'd stand a better chance of not confusing the issue."

"I—I see what you mean, sir." Sheehan's doubtful tone belied his words.

"Tell me what you can of the way the land lies and I'll try to find my way in."

"Alone?" asked Kerrigan.

"Were you thinking of coming, too?" Peter inquired thoughtfully.

"Don't you want me, Pete?"

"Perhaps not just at first. You're official, Jake, and I'm not. The whole thing may be a mare's nest. Nobody has called in the police. You might find it embarrassing."

"All right," said Kerrigan, rather shortly. "I'm plenty busy. How does Mr. Clancy get in, Terry?"

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"I don't know so much what he'll be up against, coming in from Twenty-ninth Street, until he gets to the back door." The sharp little eyes were flashing with excitement. "I've never been beyond the same, myself, but I'm thinking that it's a passage along the side of the old antique store and that they're none too particular about keeping it locked. Once through it, sir, you're in a little bit of a wee yard and the only other door there is my own. I'll be watching for you. You won't even have to knock."

"In case it doesn't pan out right to go the round-about way, Pete, you can come in the regular entrance and who's going to think anything about it?" said Kerrigan. "I mean anybody that matters."

"If you know already who matters and who doesn't," said Peter, soberly, "you're smarter than I am, Jake."

Kerrigan flushed. "I don't pretend to be that—not after the last case you and me got mixed up in. But I do have an idea now and again, and right at this minute my idea is that Terry'd better be chasing himself and putting his body to bed and his mind to rest. I still don't believe your boss has been murdered, Terence Sheehan." The police detective's voice was full of gruff kindliness. "I think he'll be turning up, maybe sooner, maybe later, but in any case I can tell you this for your sins, you old Omadhaun, if you've got Mr. Clancy really interested, you've the best chance of getting the truth that is to be had."

" . . . . Though whether he's to thank his lucky stars that you're in this game, Pete," Kerrigan resumed a few minutes later, while Wiggar was showing Terence Sheehan to the door, "is a question in my mind."

"Sit down again," said Peter, frowning. "Let's talk about this a little more. You had this story from Sheehan, as I understand it, last Sunday night."

"Yes, sure. But don't you see, Pete, the man, Olmstead, had only overstayed his original plan by less than three

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days then. And what's there to be alarmed at, finding a bit of bone in a furnace——"

"The furnace of an office building," Peter remarked, thoughtfully. "But, of course, there might be many ways of explaining the bone. Just the same, Jake, I think if you don't mind we'll have Perkins examine it. We might just as well know—about it."

"If Perkins definitely states that it did not belong to some animal, then I'll believe it, but not till then, Pete."

"And the lump of silver?"

"Might have been anything," growled Kerrigan. "May even have been that key-chain Terry spoke about. There's no contesting that the little gold holder must have been Mr. Olmstead's, but what's to prevent his having burned some things there himself, like I said, and dropped the pencil holder by mistake."

"I'm doubting some, if not all of that, Jake. But so far we've very little to go on. We don't dare jump at conclusions—about one single little item. I have a hunch we may see some queer things before the whole business is cleared up. This pencil case, now." He picked it up from the table where Sheehan had almost reluctantly laid it a few minutes since, when he turned the three salvaged articles over to Kerrigan. "There are several points it brings into question in my mind. If only you had been the one to discover it in the first place, Jake, we'd possibly have been able to get fingerprints from it. Now, of course, we get nothing but Terry's and maybe our own. If only a professional had had the job of sifting those ashes, who knows what we might have been able to discover. Now they're almost certainly gone beyond recall. It's been—eleven days. Sure to have been collected in that time."

"Then what do you hope to find when you see Terry's furnace room to-morrow, Pete?"

"I have a hunch what to look for, but whether I find it or not?—That's the question."

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Kerrigan waited for further elucidation of that last remark, but Peter's lips remained closed and his eyes fixed on vacancy. At length the police detective broke the short silence. "What do you make of those two telegrams, Pete?"

"How do you mean?"

"Were they a fake?"

"Terry was there when the first one came through," Peter considered, "so Ingalls must have received it."

"But it was phoned in. Anybody could have done that."

"Yes. But Terry said it was a matter of business that the two young officers of the Company both understood."

"Why do you say 'young'?" asked Kerrigan, sharply. "Do you know them, Pete?"

"Sheehan referred to one as 'young Mr. Harden.' As to the other, I know him by sight, and so do you."

"I never laid eyes on—" Kerrigan stopped. "By George, was it—"

"George!" Peter repeated. "Yes, it was George. The fellow in the restaurant. The girl called him Mr. Ingalls, and the young chap that came along, accompanied by that Beautiful Being, called him George. The girl, whose name we know to be Marie, had spoken of John Oliver Olmstead — You could hardly put those three things together and have any doubt about the correct answer."

"Sure as you live," murmured Kerrigan in a tone of wonder, half to himself. "Ain't it a strange thing, Pete? If that girl, that you call Marie, hadn't mentioned Olmstead's name, and you hadn't been showing off to Ray Trant, we'd never have gotten wise that Olmstead was mixed up, somehow, with Ray's counterfeiters, at least to the extent of having one of those queer bills in his possession. And putting that with Terry's story, that I happened to know about——"

"Happened?" said Peter with a half-smile. "Yes, Jake, happened—just the same way that a magnet happens to attract steel."

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"Beg pardon, Mr. Peter." Wiggar, noiseless as a shadow, was placing a tray and glasses on the low table that he had rolled up close to his master's elbow. "Might I mention a small matter that may possibly be of interest at this juncture?"

"Don't tell me you know something about this case, Wiggar," Kerrigan exclaimed. "That would be a little too much."

"About the case, no, sir." Wiggar did things with bottles and glasses that diffused a pleasing aroma in the air. "It is merely the locale, if I may put it that way, that has recently come under by observation. I won't trouble you by intruding a merely personal matter, but I have had occasion several times, latterly, to pass through Twenty-ninth Street."

"Still trying to find Dick Jarvis' people?" remarked Peter.

"Excuse me. Yes, sir. Quite so, sir. There's a person who has a little shop on Sixth Avenue. I've been to see him several times."

"Any results?" asked Peter with interest.

"Not yet, sir, but I still have hopes. What I meant to call your attention to, sir, had, however, nothing to do with my poor efforts. It was merely that in passing through Twenty-ninth Street last Monday, or rather I mean a week ago last night it was."

"Yes, yes," said Peter hastily. "We understand. A week ago this Monday night."

"A much clearer expression. Thank you, sir. As I was saying—or rather as you were saying—" (Kerrigan's Celtic impatience would have forced him into making an effort to hurry the deliberate Britisher, if Peter's wary eye had not held him in check.) "It was a week ago this Monday night that Richard and I chanced to be passing through the block between Sixth and Fifth Avenues, in order to take the uptown bus. It was raining very hard at the time, which is perhaps the reason why I remember having to stop

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a moment in front of that odd looking—incongruous is perhaps not too strong a word?"

"Not a bit," Kerrigan agreed, hastily. "Call it what you like. A funny joint——"

"The incongruous piece of property," Wiggar's tone was a trifle severe, though his face was entirely blank, "which you, sir, have been discussing. The statuary inside, and the gates. That brought a picture to my mind when Mr. Sheehan mentioned them, and when he spoke of the building having only one tenant it also made me ask myself this question. What became of the young lady?"

"Young lady?" Kerrigan's head went up, and both men regarded with an access of interest the wooden looking person who was serving them.

"Apparently she was just arriving," said Wiggar, imperturbably. "She had a very large suit case, that the old gentleman set down upon the wet pavement whilst he was unlocking the gates. Very bad for the leather, but he could hardly have managed the bag and the lock at the same time."

"An old gentleman?" considered Peter.

"With white hair, much too long to be in the mode," observed Wiggar. "Which caught the attention as the rest of his appearance left little to be desired. A very correct English top-coat, perhaps a little too good, considering the inclemency of the weather."

"And the young lady?" Peter's lips twitched. Wiggar's keen observation where his own chosen profession was involved rarely failed to tickle his master's sense of humor. "Was she properly dressed?"

"Very simply and neatly. As if she had come from a journey. I'm very sure she had, and that she went in with the old gentleman. The cab had been dismissed. It occurred to me, Mr. Peter (I hope you won't think me intrusive), that perhaps, if you are planning to make your way through that——"

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"Incongruous piece of property," Kerrigan supplied hastily.

"Thank you, sir. It might be useful to know of the possibility that there may be a young lady in residence."

"In addition to the old man, who is probably the Mr. Etherington that Sheehan spoke of," said Peter. "He will have gone to his work in the other building by the time I get there. I'm glad you told us, Wiggar. I wonder where she comes in."

"You'd better wonder how to keep her out," retorted Kerrigan. "I hope we're not going to get any dames mixed up in this case. If Etherington——"

"Jake," Peter interrupted sharply, "You're thinking too fast. Don't try to figure possibilities until you get more of the pictures developed. We know nothing about anybody, yet."

"We know Olmstead has disappeared . . . after having been caught trying to pass a bogus one hundred dollar bill."

"We don't know any of the details of that. If the counterfeit is as good as Ray seemed to think it, you or I might quite innocently take it from somebody, and pass it along, and never notice anything."

"Would I be handling one hundred dollar notes and never notice?" Kerrigan remarked sarcastically.

"If the government raised your salary to what you deserve, Jake, old pal," said Peter with a broad grin, "you might. What I mean to say is, Olmstead, having one of those spurious notes in his possession, might mean much—but it might also mean little. It's these things that are worrying me." He leaned down to gaze again at the three little objects that still lay on the table. "We'll get Perkins to give us his opinion on this." He poked the black and gruesome relic. "You see what you can find out about this hunk of silver, Jake, and leave this pencil case with me for the present. Will you?"

"For the present, yes, Pete. But I'm not quite easy in my

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mind. I think maybe I ought to be doing something—official."

"Why?" urged Peter. "It's only as a private individual and through your social connections——"

"Meaning you and Terry?" Kerrigan laughed, but his eyes were troubled.

"Meaning Terry and me," agreed Peter. "It's only through us that you know there's anything serious going on."

"That isn't so," Kerrigan corrected hastily. "It was what Ray let slip that made me sit up and take notice."

"And would he be glad to have you advertise the fact that he did let that name slip out?" countered Peter. "Nay, nay, and then some more. Still I agree with you, Jake, that, knowing what we do, we can't just sit down and let things take their course. If Ray were here I think it would be up to us to tell him what we know. But he isn't, and there are things that ought to be done in the meantime. I'll attend to some of them. Confound it, when stuff like this is handed out to me, I have to see it through. I'm made like that."

"And perhaps you think I'm not," said Kerrigan rather tartly.

"Bless my soul, Jake, are you telling me? What I just said was, I'll attend to some things that I believe I can pull off, but the most important thing right now you'll do much better than I could. It's simpler for an official——"

"To what?"

"To find out what we've got to know before we can study about anything else."

"You mean—you mean the telegrams, Pete!"

"Right. The telegrams. If they were—actually—telegrams, Jake."

"If they were! Sure. You bet. We can get that inquiry started, pronto." He half rose as he glanced about for the telephone that Wiggar was already bringing toward him. "Thanks." He placed the instrument on the table

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and started to dial. "The first wire—that was from the train——"

"Late Thursday night or early the morning of Friday the Thirteenth."

"Unlucky day," growled Kerrigan. "Western Union? Night Superintendent, please. Captain of Detectives Kerrigan speaking. Thanks. Hello. Yes. That's right. Nineteenth Precinct. Will you send to my office the first thing in the morning this information."

At a graphic gesture from his master, Wiggar had placed a pad and pencil between the two detectives. Peter wrote rapidly, and Kerrigan, reading as the words appeared, spoke into the transmitter.

"Late Thursday night or early the morning of Friday the Thirteenth. From a train somewhere between New York and St. Louis. Don't know what road. Telegram addressed to either George Ingalls or Mr. Harden, care John Oliver Olmstead Company, West Thirtieth Street, this city, and probably signed John Oliver Olmstead. Read that back."

Peter went on writing while Kerrigan listened. The room was very still. Wiggar, like a graven image, waited in the shadow. Not a gleam of the eye betrayed the fact that he was tensely alert. After a minute's silence, Kerrigan nodded his graying head and spoke again into the telephone.

"Another wire from St. Louis Monday the Sixteenth. Same address, same signature. We want the text of both messages and the place where they were handed in. Also what office here received them and transmitted them by phone."

A few details to insure prompt action and Kerrigan hung up the receiver.

"That's that," he said, rising and stretching his arms. "And I thought it was a quiet evening we were to have together, Pete, my lad, with maybe a game of rummy."

"Instead of maybe a rum game," said Peter with a grimace. He put his hand on the other man's shoulder as they

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went toward the door where Wiggar was standing with Kerrigan's hat and heavy walking stick. "We can't help the way we're made, you and I, Jake," Peter added quietly. "Maybe it's mostly curiosity that itches in our brains. Maybe it's something else. I don't know. But whatever it is, we'll just have to keep the home fires burning until Ray Trant gets back from Pondicherry. We'll have to find out what we can in the meantime, and then, perhaps, we'll have a few more *coincidences* to lay before him.

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CHAPTER VII

THE night of Monday the Sixteenth it was that Terence Sheehan, hugging to his breast the news that Mr. Jack had arrived safely in St. Louis, had gone home with a relieved and thankful heart. It was that same night, but several hours later that Wiggar observed the entrance of Marie Lamont upon the stage of this strange, involving drama. And as Terence Sheehan (who had never heard of her) at the apparent ending of his anxiety, slept peacefully, so Marie, (who, it seemed, would never be likely to know of the existence of the little Irish furnace-man,) felt herself, after her uncle's tardy but sincere welcome, to be at the end of her troubles, and went quietly and hopefully to sleep in the little guest room that she had helped him to prepare for her.

He had insisted, with an odd kind of eager diffidence, in helping her spread sheets and blankets on her bed. The things were exquisitely clean and smelled of lavendar. He laughed at the way the girl sniffed at and enjoyed the old-fashioned scent. In fact he laughed a good deal and yet there was an undercurrent of nervousness that Marie found difficulty in explaining to herself. Her uncle was a "character," undoubtedly, and she hoped that accounted for everything.

In the morning she woke to a haunting sense of strangeness not unmixed with dread. That minute of incalculable duration, when the ego finds its way back through the convoluted mazes of the brain, was heavy with foreboding. It was not until she had opened her eyes and taken in the quaint, prim comfort of the room, and the domesticated and contented appearance of her bits of wearing apparel and toilet accessories in their new habitat, that the feeling of

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discomfort and uneasiness was partially dispelled. It would take much to obliterate that first impression last night—the rainy darkness of the strange city—the more inimical darkness of an empty hall and the more daunting strangeness of the heavy locked gates and the absence of a key in the lock of a fastened door.

It was the sound of whiffling and splashing in presumably cold water in the bathroom next door that wakened her. She decided with a half smile that no one would make those noises if the water were warm, and that her uncle was trying to be quiet for her sake, but found it difficult. She snuggled down in the blankets to wait her turn since the apartment boasted but the one bath, and fell asleep again.

The next time she woke, one small, seeking ray of sunlight had come into the room and was pointing a derisive finger at the two shoes that seemed to be just stepping off the edge of a braided rug. They did look very helpless, little and forlorn, for the bright polish with which they had started on their long journey was dimmed, like her hopes. She tried not to think of that. Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad after all.

The smell of coffee greeted her as she peeped out into the hall. She could hear her uncle talking over the telephone in the living-room. Not the words, only the sound of his voice. There was the draft from an open window somewhere that whisked around her bare ankles and drew the door to behind her with a sharp bang.

Instantly the telephone conversation ceased and Nathaniel Etherington came hurriedly into the hall.

"Good morning, my dear," he said. He smiled at the little tousled, kimono-wrapped figure that turned at his approach, but the swift glance that he flashed across her face was questioning and somehow, in a way she could not have described, vaguely apprehensive.

"Good morning, Uncle Nat." Her clear eyes questioned in their turn, though he appeared unconscious of the fact.

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"How will you have your eggs?" he asked with an eager air of hospitality. "And how soon will you be ready? Don't hurry. I'm taking the day off and I wouldn't miss having my breakfast with—with you sitting opposite . . ."

He broke off, though she felt he had been going on to say more. She answered his questions and hurried through her bath for she was anxious not to keep him waiting. As she came out presently into the hall she heard him again at the telephone. This time he was talking louder and she could hear an occasional word. Someone he addressed as Miss Fanny. Though the heels of her slippers made quite a little noise on the waxed floor he went right on with what he was saying.

"That's very, very good of you. I'll be most grateful. It settles rather an embarrassing problem for an old man. Thank you again, Miss Fanny. I'll bring her down as soon——"

Realizing that the pronoun feminine in the last sentence could hardly mean anyone but herself, Marie Lamont slipped hastily into her own room and closed the door. No matter how funny things were she was not going to "snoop," she told herself, scornfully.

A little later when they were sitting at the table, her uncle explained the matter diffidently and with apparent regret.

"Of course I'd like to have you here, my dear, but it's really no place for a charming and delightful young lady. I should have foreseen that you would be that. I mean to say, you know, an antique bachelor is no companion for one so—well, so altogether the sort of thing—I'm not used to paying compliments, nor to women's society, my child. I do it very badly. I'm a crabbed old recluse. I can't ask you to put up with me and with my sketchy menage. I do my own cooking, you see. There's no place for a maid." He spoke hurriedly and as if to forestall an interruption, but Marie did not have that determined little face for nothing.

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"I'm a very good cook," she put in firmly. "We'd have no use whatever for a maid."

He looked pleased, but shook his head. "Wouldn't do, my child. I couldn't have you worrying your pretty head over an old hermit's likes and dislikes. I can't keep from swearing when things go wrong. I have some very annoying habits and I'm too old to change. I won't change. I don't like myself as I am, but I'm not going to watch those eyes—so like your mother's—finding out all—all my weak points. Dear me," he exclaimed almost angrily, "don't look at me like that. I—There are many reasons why I'd like to have you with me," and she was sure his eyes were wistful though his lips were firm and his voice was brusque to the point of irritation "but I musn't—I musn't indulge myself at your expense. Anyhow it's all settled. I know one woman I can bank on. She's the salt of the earth. Has charge of the antique shop downstairs. Sees to it that my place up here is kept in order. She has an apartment somewhere uptown and an extra room. It will be suitable. Bound to be. Miss Fanny Kinsella knows what's what!"

"You mean you want me to live with her?" Marie's heart sank. The call of blood is strong in some natures, and in spite of all his oddities and his sometimes repelling manner, her heart warmed toward this handsome, distinguished-looking old gentleman who was the last relative, so far as she knew, that she had in the world.

"You—Surely you don't mind," he asked and glanced at her sharply.

"She's a stranger, Uncle Nat."

"Well, but so am I, my dear. Really and in fact you know nothing about me. I don't think anyone who's been alone as much as I have would be nice to live with. Wait until you see Miss Fanny. You'll be glad of the change, I promise you."

"Hasn't she been living alone?" Marie was quick

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enough to guess that this paragon was not young and probably had no family.

"Um-hum. Well, it hasn't spoiled her. You'll see."

"But I thought I could make it up to you—I mean by keeping your house, Uncle Nat. I don't want to be a burden," Marie expostulated with an engaging seriousness. "If you won't let me, I'll have to find something to do to earn money. I can't take everything and make no return."

"Oh, dear me," Etherington exclaimed with sudden exasperation, "the money doesn't matter at a time like this. I have enough to make you comfortable, but you must let me do it in my own way. I don't want you to feel under obligation. You aren't. It's better for you to be with a woman—a lady—though the phrase, if not the kind of person, has gone out of fashion. She'll think of nice things for you to do to amuse yourself—to occupy your time. I have to work all day and sometimes far into the night. You'd be miserably lonely."

His voice ceased suddenly. He clenched his napkin in his hand and half rose from his seat. Someone was running up the uncarpeted stairs outside, two steps at a time.

"Hello, Uncle Nat! What's all this about your taking a day off?"

A young man burst, without ceremony, into the room. He was fairly tall, with broad, athletic shoulders and a very pleasant face, Marie thought. His surprise at seeing her was obvious. He stopped just inside the door, and hardly had enough presence of mind left to close his mouth at the end of his question.

"Barry! I might have guessed no one would have come thundering up like that but you." Old Nathaniel threw down his napkin and presented the intruder to the girl sitting there so cozily at the breakfast table. "Will you let me present Mr. Barry Harden. My niece, Miss Marie Lamont. She came unexpectedly last night from California."

Young Harden recovered his sangfroid almost at once.

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He murmured some conventional phrases of surprise and delight at meeting her. Marie liked the way his hair stood up crisply from the parting that showed when he bowed before her, and the way his ears were set close to his head, the quick intelligence of his eyes, the laughter that gave a sort of sparkle to his deep voice. In her interest in summing up these various points she lost a little of what her uncle was saying.

"Well, of course. I can understand that," Mr. Harden remarked, "but that portrait of Galsworthy ought to go to the Lincoln Press tomorrow and I don't like to have anyone retouch the plate but you."

"Rosen can do it plenty well enough. He'll be glad of the chance, too. Give it to Rosen, Barry. You don't appreciate that man. He's just as good as I am—or better."

"John Olmstead doesn't think so, and neither do I. If he were here he wouldn't let you off."

"But he's gone—to St. Louis, wasn't it? When do you expect him back, Barry?"

Marie was surprised that the nice-looking young man glanced quickly at her before he answered. There seemed to be no reason, for he spoke almost at once. A commonplace reply. If it had not been for the instant uncertainty of his manner she would never have remembered that he said, "He has to be back next Thursday to attend a meeting of the Board of Trade. We had a wire from him yesterday."

"Well, you get Rosen to touch up that portrait if it needs it," her uncle repeated. "It isn't every day that a man has a beautiful brand-new niece to chaperone. By the way, Barry, before you go back to the shop—you'll excuse me, my dear?"

Etherington drew the younger man aside. There was a short colloquy. Marie saw Mr. Harden nod once or twice, saw him put his hand on Uncle Nat's shoulder, and nod again. She caught a few words. "To-morrow night. Yes. I understand." Automatically she picked up her uncle's

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napkin, folded it and laid it beside her own. Then she began to straighten up the table. The two men went on talking. Presently she heard Mr. Harden say, quite sharply, "No. Sorry. I can't. Haven't that much money on my person. Besides you don't need to—I mean leave it to me. Anything I can do for you, sir——" His voice dropped again.

A few minutes later he took his leave. The room looked somehow different after he had gone. A little worn, aged and austere. She helped her uncle move the breakfast things into a small neat kitchenette where they left them. While they were thus occupied he explained that Barry was an officer of the John Oliver Olmstead Company where he, himself, had been employed "since before the memory of man."

"They could do without me well enough," he finished, "but it was rather nice of the boy to pretend they couldn't, wasn't it? I think you're going to like him, my dear. I have every confidence in him, myself."

He hurried her a little after that—"Not to keep Miss Fanny waiting longer than we must, my dear."

Marie had repacked her bag reluctantly, but had made no further objection. After all, since for the present she must accept the necessities of life from her uncle, how could she possibly dictate terms or conditions of any sort.

In silence she followed him down the stairs that she had mounted with such a beating heart the night before. It had been too dark then to notice anything but the most salient details. It was little better now. The two doors on the intermediate landing were closed. The dusky skylight at the top of the house was the only means of illumination until they reached the ground floor. Here were visible two doors. A narrow one, with a glass panel in which was embedded a heavy wire mesh, obviously was the one through which they had entered the previous night. At the left, as she faced this,

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was the other door and it was to this one that her uncle went immediately. He swung it open, looked inside, nodded, beckoned to her and passed quickly through, doffing his hat as he did so.

"Miss Fanny Kinsella, most marvelous of women, I salute you!" The quaint humor of the exaggerated gesture and phrase did not detract from the real chivalry that underlay them. Marie looked quickly past him, eager to see what sort of person she was to have for a companion—a duenna.

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CHAPTER VIII

AT FIRST Marie Lamont could distinguish no living human being in the crowded mass of objects that confused her sight. It seemed as if she must have stepped backward "Through the Looking-Glass," for practically everything had its back toward her. Tall ancient chests, clocks, bureaus, all exhibiting their incontestibly wormeaten rears. A Niobe mournful to behold, though showing little but inexcusably sad folds of heavy drapery. A cast of the Milo Venus, with that lovely gracious slant to her brave shoulders. A mummy case showing a worn and broken base where it had lain, who knows how long, in some forgotten tomb. A prancing faun with a stub of neatly curling tail to match the pattern of his ambrosial locks. It was at a point beside his uplifted, gleesome leg that Marie's disconcerted gaze came to rest.

"How do you do, my dear?"

The small face that appeared for an instant between the mummy and the faun was alive with intelligence and humor. Shrewd laughing eyes passed swiftly over Marie's hesitant figure, and the girl felt that no least detail had escaped that penetrating gaze. It was uncanny, and for that fleeting instant quite unnerving.

"How are you, my dear?" The conventional words were repeated as Miss Fanny Kinsella made her way around numerous unseen obstacles and appeared in her entirety in the small open space where they awaited her. She looked up, and it was a long way up, into Nathaniel Etherington's face. "Do you mean to tell me that you're handing over all this youth and charm to me?" she asked in a quick, neat voice that went so perfectly with her quick, neat little curls and hands and feet and even with her neat and probably

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quickened breast that one felt she must have been entirely designed and turned out complete by one concern.

"You may believe that I regret the necessity, Miss Fanny. It's only that I know how much better off she'll be in your hands." The old gentleman looked down at her as she looked up at him.

"My home surroundings are a little more human I will admit," said Miss Kinsella, folding her arms. "Why your uncle insists on staying in a place like this when he doesn't have to, my dear, is beyond me. It's bad enough in the daytime, but what that yard out there must look like at night I hate to think. If the Wellmouth Estate offered to pay me a million dollars a week to live here——"

"You'd know the world had gone mad, Miss Fanny," chuckled Nathaniel Etherington. "When they still make us use gas, for lighting, and I've had to put in all the conveniences myself the idea of giving up a million dollars to anyone for anything is not conceivable to the normal mind. But we're taking up your time."

"Time," cried Miss Kinsella, with a quick gesture that started at her elbows and made her hands fly up like two small birds. "What is it they say now? Time is the principal thing of which I have nothing but. Is that right, Miss Marie Lamont?"

"I never heard it before—and I hope you'll just call me Marie, Miss Kinsella." The little frozen places in the girl's consciousness began to thaw though the unaccustomed sound of the broad a and the way this new acquaintance slurred certain words but pronounced others with great precision made her feel something of the hesitation an inexperienced person often has in meeting one of another race or clime.

"I surely will be glad to. That's very dear of her, isn't it?" The little lady turned again to Etherington. "I'm sorry I can't go up with you, but everything is arranged. Here's the key and a note to the man in the hall. Marie

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will easily recognize her room. There are only two bedrooms and her's is tidy. Make yourself comfortable, my dear. I have to be here until five, but after that I'm a free woman. What are you doing with her this afternoon?"

Etherington explained his plans of which Miss Fanny Kinsella heartily approved. He and Marie would take a cab up to the apartment, where he would give her time to establish herself. There was a trunk to be seen to and perhaps other small matters. They would lunch somewhere and go to Roxy's in the afternoon. He was as gleeful as a boy.

"It's a long time since I've allowed myself a holiday, and this is an occasion par excellence," he said, beaming down at them both. "I beg that you'll do us the honor of dining with us, Miss Fanny. It will make the day complete."

She demurred a little but Marie could see that she was really delighted. And well she might be for the dinner was the crown of a very successful day. The restaurant he chose was one of those French ones that by reason of serving quite exquisite hors d'ouvre, special entrés, long thin crisp rolls like tiny walking sticks, sweet butter and more heavy comestibles of equal excellence, has expanded through a series of English basements and around unexpected gardens until a guide is required to locate the table that has been previously reserved.

That was, indeed, the end of the day, for old Mr. Etherington pleaded some necessary duties he could no longer avoid, and put them in a taxi, prepaying (in fact, to make sure, overpaying) the driver. He stood at the curb with his soft hat in his hand, his white hair blowing in the wind, until the traffic drew them into the current, and that was the last Marie saw of her eccentric relative that night.

She had been excited and interested all day and as nearly happy as the recency of the loss of her father would permit. Her uncle, too, had been all that she had hoped he might be. It was only when night began to fall that the strange un-

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