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THE TALL HOUSE MYSTERY

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE WESTWOOD MYSTERY

THE WEDDING CHEST

MYSTERY

DEATH OF JOHN TAIT

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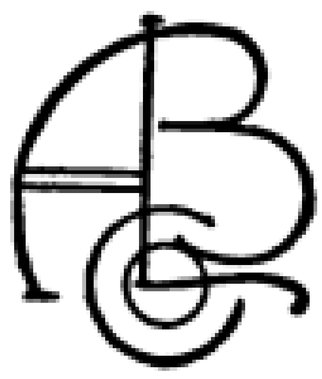
THE TALL HOUSE MYSTERY

By A. FIELDING



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Bequest
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ONE

THERE is no pleasanter place in London after dinner than the large central hall of the Carlton Club, with its comfortable armchairs and its little coffee tables, that suggest both privacy and gregariousness.

For here a man may speak to a fellow-member without being introduced—perhaps because it has so large a number of young men among its members. Just now, the tables were almost empty. It was only a little past eight. Haliburton had dined early in that large dining-room where the portraits of Conservative statesmen look down tolerantly on morning-coats or full tails. Haliburton had had a friend, a saturnine, silent man called Tark, dining with him; and now Moy, a young solicitor, had dropped in for a few words.

Haliburton was talking at the moment.

"I think I'm a fatalist," he was saying. "Yes, on the whole, I think I am." He was a pleasant-faced young man, tall, thin, with a certain assured yet unhurried way with him which, some said, was due to the fact that he had never yet had to bestir himself for anything. He was the son of Haliburton, the banker, and grandson

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of Haliburton, the ship-owner, and through his mother alone had as an income what many would consider a handsome capital. He was Unionist member for some small country constituency until something better should be free.

Moy was about the same age, around twenty-five; small of stature, quick and eager in eye and movement. Tark, the third man, struck such a different note that at first glance one would have taken him for a foreigner. Moy liked Haliburton, but he did not care for his companion, whom he had met in his company a couple of times lately. But, though he did not like Tark, Moy was interested in the man. For the young solicitor was writing a play in secret, and was keenly interested in finding characters for it. Haliburton, he had decided, was no earthly good to a writer. Rich. Easy going. Kindly . . . but this other, the chap with the name that suited him somehow—because it rhymed with shark probably, Moy decided—he might be very useful. He turned to him now.

"You a fatalist too?" he asked. "But you can't be, or you wouldn't have fished Haliburton out of that weir as you did."

Everyone in their little world knew that Tark's punt and Haliburton's canoe had collided on the Thames, and that, but for Tark's swimming powers, the House of Haliburton would have had no heir, for Haliburton could not swim. Somehow you wouldn't expect him to, Moy reflected. Haliburton would naturally count on a motor boat turning up, or a submarine nipping along, or a seaplane swooping to his assistance.

"No." Tark's voice suggested that he had said all

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there was to say on the point. He was the most silent man that Moy had yet met.

"A fatalist doesn't necessarily mean a man of inaction," Haliburton explained carefully.

"He evidently struggled in the water!" Moy said with a laugh. Haliburton laughed too. Tark only gave a twist of his thin tight lips.

What a pity that his play was not on the Inquisition, Moy thought. Tark would do so splendidly for one of the inquisitors; a man without feelings, but with plenty of intelligence. Or had Tark intelligence? He looked at the low forehead, the high set ears, the something about the whole face that suggested stone, or wood, and was not sure. But his suitability for the rôle of inquisitor seemed to fit better the longer he studied him. Yet Tark had never shown him any eagerness, any intensity of emotion, and an inquisitor must be capable of both. It must be something hidden deep down in the man. Unless his ideas of him were all wrong, Moy reflected.

"Well." Moy roused himself from his discreet but intent contemplation of Tark. "Now for the reason for my coming in formal state this evening. I have a proposal I want to lay before you, Haliburton."

"And I thought you a friend," murmured Haliburton lazily.

"You know that we—my father's firm—often have houses to let for our clients? Well, among these is a house in Chelsea called The Tall House."

"Sir Miles Huntington's?" Haliburton labeled it correctly.

"Yes. He's off to the Arctic for a year. The year's nearly up, but as he wanted such a high rental, the

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place has been on our hands all the time. A week ago, we got a note from him, which had evidently been months on the way, authorizing me to let it for whatever I could get for it. But by now, there's only a bare six weeks or so left. It's a beautiful old house. Angelica Kaufmann lived in it. Reynolds painted one of the ceilings, or may have done so——"

He saw Haliburton sit up with sudden interest, his large clear eyes fastened on Moy. Moy knew why and nodded to himself with an inward grin. The fish was rising.

"Of course, it's hardly ever that a house of that kind is to be had furnished for a bit over a month, five weeks to be exact. As a rule, I could do nothing with so short a time, but I happened to speak of it to Frederick Ingram yesterday morning." More interest in Haliburton's steady gaze. Even Tark of the impassive features seemed to be listening very intently. "Yes, I mentioned it to Fred Ingram yesterday. His brother Charles and he——"

"Half-brother," corrected Haliburton in a tone as though the detail mattered.

"—half-brother, then," Moy corrected, "are also clients of ours. We handle their father's estate."

"If you're going to take Frederick Ingram as a lessee!" Haliburton spoke with a contempt at variance with his usual placidity.

"Hardly!" Moy's tone matched the other's. "No, he doesn't come in to this except as the originator of the proposal, which is this: Miss Pratt, it seems, wants tremendously to stay in town in a really old house with genuine period furnishings, and, though the Tall

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House is shabby enough inside and out, it contains some magnificent old stuff. Entailed, of course, or it wouldn't be there. Well, bearing this in mind about Miss Pratt, Freddie wondered if his brother wouldn't like to take the house on for the few remaining weeks."

Haliburton's face flushed.

"But Ingram turned it down when I dropped in last evening," Moy went on, and Haliburton's flush died away.

"He thought it would be beyond him. It's not merely the rent, it's the servants, and all that sort of thing. Well, that seemed that, but this morning Frederick had another brain wave. The new idea is to form a sort of syndicate among ourselves, five of us, and each take the house and run it for a week. Mrs. Pratt and her daughter being the guests of each host in turn. Charles Ingram is quite keen on this amended form. He will be one of the five; a friend of his, Gilmour, who shares a flat with him at Harrow, will make two; I come in as third—my humble tenement is in the hands of the plumbers at the moment, and I assure you I shall be thankful not to dance to any more of their piping for a while. Ingram at once suggested my asking you to be the fourth host, and any friend whom you liked to nominate could be the fifth. That would make you and him all square, he seems to think."

"That's very decent of Ingram," Haliburton said warmly. "Of course, I accept with pleasure. And Tark, here, will come as the fifth man, I know. He's keen on getting to know Ingram better, since reading one of his books."

Tark's affirmative came at once. He moved for a

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moment so that the light fell full on him, and Moy thought again how unprepossessing his face was, with its narrow lips slightly askew, its narrow-bridged nose just off the true, and its narrow dark eyes that never seemed to dance or sparkle. But his lips were parted now as though he were breathing fast. Moy was surprised. That Haliburton should be interested, he could understand, or rather he had firmly expected, for he and Charles Ingram were suitors for the hand of Winnie Pratt, but that Tark should be stirred . . . he had had an almost wolfish look for a second. . . . Fortunately Haliburton was vouching for him, otherwise Moy would never have let him come in. But at any rate, he, Moy, could now tell Ingram that the syndicate was complete. Just like chivalrous Ingram to have practically insisted that his rival should have an equal chance with himself. Probably by the end of the five weeks Miss Pratt would have made up her mind which of the two men she preferred. Haliburton had been prime favorite till a month ago, when Ingram had first met her, and had seemed to score with his talk of books and plays. Ingram was a highbrow, a writer of scientific books himself. Mathematics was his especial line, but he was a man of broad literary interests. Mrs. Pratt openly favored Haliburton, but then Haliburton's rent roll explained that, and in time he would succeed his shipping grandfather in the peerage. Moy was looking forward to the five weeks. He certainly ought to get good material for his play out of it. Take Winnie Pratt for instance . . . a lovely young thing, complexion all cream and roses. But with no character that one could get hold of, how could one catch her wonderful charm?

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Tark was speaking again. Moy felt as though the man's vocal chords must creak with the unaccustomed work.

"Ingram's book on *Ciphers Past and Present* is positively monumental." He spoke with slow heavy emphasis.

Moy did not know whether Tark's praise referred to quantity or quality, but he nodded a cheerful assent.

"I take the first week, beginning next Friday," he told them. "So as to get things rolling smoothly."

"Friday!" broke in Tark, "why not Thursday or Saturday?"

Moy thought he was joking, but the wooden features did not show any indication of it being a jest. On the contrary, Tark repeated his question.

"It fitted in better," Moy said rather vaguely.

"He's superstitious as a cat," Haliburton said.

Moy burst out laughing. "You mean nervous——" and he laughed again, for any one less nervous—if looks could be relied on—than Tark, he had yet to see.

"Well, he's superstitious as a Solomon Islander, then," Haliburton amended. "That's because he's not a fatalist. But go on, Moy, you're going to take the first week——"

"I suggested that Ingram should take the second, but he thought you and he should toss for it."

"Certainly not! Of course Ingram must take the second week," Haliburton said definitely. "Any week after his will suit me. And I'll take one day less or more, Tark, so as to throw your week, when it comes, on to the most auspicious moment."

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Moy reflected how easy it was to work with pleasant chaps like Ingram and Haliburton.

"All right, then, you take the third week——" he was jotting notes down as he spoke, "shall we put Gilmour in for the fourth, and Tark here for the fifth?"

But Haliburton suggested that as Tark seemed so fussy over days—his smile rid the words of all offense—perhaps it would be better for Gilmour to take the third week, which would bring his, Haliburton's, week and Tark's together at the end, when days could be added or omitted as preferred. It was settled like that, and Moy stayed a few minutes more to explain how he had arranged about servants—which was why it would have been very awkward to alter the date of taking over the house. Another client of his firm's had given her servants a holiday on board wages and had been groaning at the expense. He had wired her a suggestion that he could get them a five weeks' engagement *en bloc*, to which she had agreed with alacrity.

The servants, too, partly unable to help themselves, and partly taken with the idea of handsome tips, had agreed to start work this coming Friday if so requested by Moy. Everything promised to go without a hitch. He would be treasurer. Any man could invite any friends he wanted during his week, but Moy hoped that only the bedrooms on one of the floors would be used, as he wanted no trouble with the maids. The house had a couple of full-size lawn tennis courts behind it, and day-time friends of any, or all, of the five would be welcome. As for evening entertainments, he, Moy, would give an opening dance, and a dance would close the last of the five weeks, otherwise, again remembering the

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servants, the hosts would do their entertaining outside the house.

Moy left, after the two had signed a simple preliminary agreement. Haliburton turned to Tark when the young solicitor had hurried out to his little car.

"I had no idea until you told me, that you were interested in Ingram's line of work." Haliburton looked at his companion with friendly curiosity as they sauntered back to their table in the lounge.

"Numbers, the science of numbers, has always fascinated me." Tark was unresponsive as always, yet now there was something in the dark depths of his eyes like slumbering fire. "More so even than ciphers, and they're fascinating enough."

There were those who hinted that Tark was getting full payment out of Haliburton for having dived in and held up the other's unconscious body, but if so, his manners were certainly not those of a climber. He gave the impression of disliking everyone at first sight. Even Haliburton at times wished that someone else had saved his life.

Moy drove on to Harrow, where Ingram and Gilmour shared the ground floor of a pleasant rambling house. It was emphatically the flat of two young men who were workers. Ingram, as has been said, wrote on more or less mathematical subjects. Gilmour was a Civil Service First Division clerk. Both young men lived well within their means. At the moment, Moy found Frederick Ingram with his half-brother in the latter's book-lined writing-room. Frederick had dropped in to ask about some doubtful figures in an equation, he explained. Moy knew that he had gone in for that sort of

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thing during his short and inglorious career at Oxford, and also knew that the elder Ingram was giving him some proof-reading to do for him. But proof-reading would hardly explain the look on Frederick's face as he brushed past the solicitor, his beetling black brows knitted, his small, but thick-lipped, mouth set. And even in the room, usually so devoid of all stir, there was something that suggested a clash of personalities still in the air. Ingram himself had a firm will. He looked as much. His was a handsome face with its scholar's brow and deep-set passionate eyes with their direct gaze. A humorous mouth, a rather forbiddingly high-bridged nose, and a resolute jaw.

He now pushed some books away, and stretched himself as though he too had felt the tension, and was glad to relax.

"Gilmour out?" Moy asked after shaking hands and accepting a glass of light Australian wine. He learned that Gilmour was in his own den. So into the lounge Moy and his host now went. A door opened.

"Frederick gone?" Gilmour asked in a defensive voice, apparently prepared to shut the door intsantly on a negative reply.

"Yes, some of my figures puzzled him," Ingram said slowly, and with a sigh of vexation, or weariness that could hardly be connected with figures.

His telephone rang, and he stepped back into his room.

"Figures of some sort are always the explanations of a fall from Frederick," Gilmour said under his breath, as Ingram closed his door. Moy grinned. None knew better than he how involved the financial affairs of the

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younger Ingram were, and he strongly suspected that Ingram had given him some work to do merely as an excuse for helping him out with money, though he claimed to have found Frederick unexpectedly careful and good at the job.

Ingram now came back, and the three discussed the taking over of The Tall House. Ingram was vastly entertained at the idea. He had an engagement, however, and had to hurry off, leaving Gilmour and Moy to finish working out the details on paper.

"I hope he'll get his money's worth," Moy said as they finished. "A rather vulgar way of putting it. But I hope Ingram won't be let down."

"You mean Miss Pratt?" Gilmour slanted his head on one side and looked doubtful. He was a smallish man, very good at games. He was not, and did not look, clever, but he did look companionable and cheery, which was all that was necessary in a stable companion of Ingram's, Moy reflected. The mathematician had brains enough for any two.

Moy now grunted that he did mean Miss Pratt.

"If she's any judge of character, she'll take Ingram and be thankful," Gilmour said warmly.

"Haliburton's a nice chap too," Moy reminded him a trifle impishly. He found himself looking forward to the coming five weeks at The Tall House from its sheer human interest. A lovely girl, two honest men in love with her . . . what more could any future dramatist hope to find laid out before him? Whom would she choose? Ingram had fame and sufficient means to live in quiet comfort. Haliburton could offer splendor and a title later on. Which would Winnie Pratt take?

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TWO

"Why do you dislike me so?" Winnie Pratt smiled up at the young man beside her. Most young men would have been overcome with joy, for Miss Pratt made a lovely picture as she stood on the lawn of The Tall House in a white muslin frock with a soft green sash and a large hat. Her flower-like little face just now wore a bewildered, hurt expression that her delicately aligned eyebrows emphasized.

Gilmour laughed awkwardly. "Have I been rude, Miss Pratt? If so, it's only because I'm not accustomed to such visions of loveliness. I'm grown into a dull old hack." Now Lawrence Gilmour did look rather dull, but he was distinctly not old, and he was quite unusually good-looking in a fresh-faced, ruddy, rather countrified way.

"Is he a dull old hack?" she asked Moy, who was passing them at the moment.

"Do you want a standing opinion?" he asked with affected seriousness.

"If it's not too expensive," Miss Pratt returned, smiling at him.

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"Nothing is too expensive for you!" he retorted with mock devotion. "Then merely as an opinion for the purpose of the discussion, and subject to the——"

"Help! Let me escape!" Gilmour edged away with mock fright, but with genuine eagerness, and walked back into the house.

"There!" Winnie waved a hand after him, "tell me, Mr. Moy, why he avoids me so. It—it's—most——" She seemed at a loss for a word.

"Unusual," Moy finished, laughing. She laughed too. But there was vexation in her lovely eyes. "It's so noticeable," she persisted petulantly.

Moy refused to take her seriously. "The absence of one worshiper among the multitude? Surely not!" But he went after Gilmour.

He found him in the square hall of the house drinking lemon squash.

"Look here," Moy began at once, "why make yourself conspicuous, old man?"

"In what way?" Gilmour's tone was wary.

"By insisting so markedly on having nothing to do with Miss Pratt," Moy finished. "What's wrong with meeting a lovely young thing half way? Most men would give half their fortune to be in your shoes."

"I'll do a deal with them, instantly!" Gilmour grinned back. "I loathe the girl, Moy, and that's the truth."

Moy stared at him. Yet he looked in earnest. But of course this was just a joke.

"Because of her cadaverous and withered appearance, I suppose," Moy asked. Even Gilmour laughed at that question.

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"I know it sounds mad," Gilmour was speaking a little under his breath, slowly and very gravely. "She's infernally pretty. And yet——" He hesitated. "Oh, well, put it down to my not wanting to make a fool of myself—just now. Oh, damn, there she comes again!" And catching sight of a flicker of white muslin, he once more fled, this time into a farther room.

Moy's lips twitched as he watched him. From where he stood, he could see that the white muslin belonged to Mrs. Pratt, not to the daughter. He himself went back into the garden again, but he did not make for Miss Pratt. Winnie was not for any solicitor. He wondered with a moment's amusement how Mrs. Pratt would take it if he entered the lists too. For Mrs. Pratt considered that Haliburton was the only possible choice for her beautiful daughter. Unfortunately Winnie, like many another spoiled beauty, seemed on her arrival at The Tall House to have suddenly set her heart on what apparently she was not to have, and that was Gilmour. He was evidently anchored elsewhere, Moy reflected. No man whose heart was free could withstand those smiles. Gilmour had been about to say as much just now. What did perplex Moy was the extraordinary fact of Gilmour's dislike of the girl, his almost open hostility to her. It was all really more amusing to watch and speculate over than he had expected. And few things in life are that. He was, of course, prepared to see the Haliburton-Ingram silent, well-mannered duel continue, but he had never hoped to see Miss Pratt fairly throw herself at the head of a third man, who would try his best to throw the enchantress back again. He wondered how Haliburton and Ingram liked it.

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Fortunately they were such pleasant fellows, both of them, and Miss Pratt's attack was simply an acute form of wanting what she was not going to get, which would cure itself in time. Luckily it was Gilmour and not Frederick Ingram whom she had suddenly decided to capture. Frederick Ingram professed himself one of her victims, but Winnie refused even to look at him; which was as well, for Frederick was an utter waster. It was said that even Ingram had been so stirred by the cheek of Frederick daring to lift his eyes to the Beauty, that he had told him not to come near The Tall House while she was there. Moy watched Ingram for a moment, reflecting on the oddity that the scholar should be so captivated by a featherhead. Moy was still of an age to put a value on cleverness in women which he would not do in later years. Yes, he vowed to himself, Miss Pratt would be difficult to put in a play . . . apart from her beauty, there seemed so little to get hold of . . . Then how, in a play, to make it clear why two sensible young men were ready to count a day well lost if it brought them but one smile from her?

Haliburton came out of the house again, and stood a moment watching Ingram play. As a rule he was well worth attention. Turning his head, Haliburton saw that Tark was also watching the game.

"Had your talk with him yet?" he asked pleasantly. Tark started as though he had not noticed that anyone stood beside him.

"Not yet."

"I heard you talking to someone in the house just

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now. It sounded like Frederick Ingram. He isn't here, surely?"

Tark did not reply.

"I didn't know you knew him," Haliburton went on.

"I met him abroad," came the casual reply. Moy thought again how his voice suggested lack of use. Yet the man did not look an anchorite. Or did he? Moy, for one, had a feeling as though Tark lived in a cell—windowless, doorless, dark and utterly lonely.

"Probably through no fault of your own," Haliburton said excusingly.

Tark gave the half-smile, half-sneer that was his nearest to showing merriment.

"I didn't realize that he was a brother of the mathematician Ingram. By the way, isn't he coming to stay here at the house too?"

"Certainly not," was the instant rejoinder. "I believe Ingram has taken him on in a sort of semi-demi-secretarial position, but neither he nor Gilmour are fond of Frederick. Like most people." And with that Haliburton seemed to lose himself in the game again.

"What's the matter with Ingram's play!" he ejaculated after another moment.

"Miss Pratt," came the reply. Haliburton's eyes, following the other's, now saw Gilmour walking stolidly along, his eyes on the grass, like a worried owner thinking of re-turfing, and beside him, her face turned up to his downbent one, which did not even glance at her, pattered the little white shoes of Miss Pratt.

Haliburton frowned and watched Ingram serve another fault.

"Women always want what they can't get," Hali-

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burton said at length, and for once his good nature sounded a trifle forced. "Miss Pratt has all the rest of us at her feet, and just because Gilmour holds out, she means to have his scalp."

Moy came closer. He overheard the words. "She's a dreadful flirt," he threw in lightly. Moy wanted to hear what Haliburton would reply. Motives and cross currents, just now, were to Moy what rats are to a terrier. He could not pass them by.

"I wouldn't call her a flirt," Haliburton said uneasily.

Moy laughed at him.

"You wouldn't call her anything but perfection."

Haliburton reddened. He had a trick of that.

"Oh, I don't know," he spoke awkwardly, "I don't mind owning that I wish she would stop trying to sweep Gilmour off his feet. There's no harm in her trying, of course, but——" He stopped, not quite sure how he intended to finish the sentence.

"She'll soon tire of her effort," Moy now said soothingly, and in silence the three watched Ingram miss a ball that he could have caught with his eyes shut had he been his usual nimble-footed self. He won in the end, it was true, but the games he had lost he had given away. He now made for Miss Pratt, and Gilmour at once stepped back, waving them towards the house for drinks. Miss Pratt would have lingered, but Gilmour fairly swept them on their path and stood smiling a little as they went.

Mrs. Pratt touched his arm. She, too, was smiling, but her eyes were not gay.

"A word with you, Mr. Gilmour. Suppose we have

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a look at the malmaisons?" They turned a corner of the artificially intricate little garden. It cut them off from the courts. As they stood before the flowers she went on:

"Mr. Gilmour, I think I must speak plainly to you."

"By all means." His sunburned face smiled encouragingly down into her worn one. Mrs. Pratt had been as lovely as Winnie in her day, but no one would have guessed it now.

"I want you to stop throwing my daughter at Mr. Ingram's head." She lifted her chin as she spoke and looked him straight in the eyes. For the first time, Gilmour really noticed her. He saw energy and will power in that face—qualities that he always admired. He saw more—the determination that makes things come to pass—another of his own likings.

"I don't agree with your way of putting it," he said now, quietly, "but if you mean, that because Ingram is my friend, I want him to have the girl he loves, you're right. I do. He'll make her a splendid husband. Any mother could hand her daughter to Charles Ingram with confidence. I've known him for years, and I assure you that he——"

She made an impatient snap with the fingers that hung down at her side.

"Winnie is going to marry Mr. Haliburton. That was why I got out of all our other engagements to come here for this month. But your friend, Mr. Ingram, is quite another matter. I do not think she would be happy with him."

He looked his dissent.

"Please, Mr. Gilmour," the mother said to that,

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"please don't try to encourage your friend. He hasn't a hope of marrying her. She really does love Mr. Haliburton. She told me as much herself."

"When?" he asked skeptically. "Months ago? But that's over, or nearly over."

"Winnie's affections have a way of circling round," the mother, too, spoke a trifle dryly. There was a short silence.

"As for your own conduct," she went on frankly, "it's splendid. But then, you're a born realist."

"What's that?" he asked.

"I mean by that, a person who goes for the substance and not for the shadow. Winnie is born to go for shadows. You have the good sense and cleverness to know that she's only making a fuss over you in order to tease poor Basil Haliburton."

Gilmour liked being thought clever. "Is that it?" he asked. He looked genuinely relieved—and was.

"It makes it damned awkward for me sometimes," he said honestly. "I wish she wouldn't!"

For a second the mother's eyes flashed. And Mrs. Pratt's eyes could shoot fire on occasions, he saw to his surprise.

"You're the first man who has ever complained about it," she said, and he grinned at once placatingly and ruefully.

"I don't suppose I would either, but for——" He hesitated. "I'm giving you confidence for confidence, Mrs. Pratt. There's a certain girl whom I hope very much will some day be my wife. I want her to come up to The Tall House for a couple of days——"

"That's just what I told Winnie!" she said almost

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jubilantly. "I felt sure there was something like that. I do congratulate you, Mr. Gilmour. What's her name?"

"Alfreda Longstaff. But it's not settled—unfortunately. It's only a hope," he put in hastily.

"Do have her up here," she begged. "I'll chaperone her with pleasure. But now to come back to my first, my only grievance," she smiled at him now with genuine kindliness, "please don't try to wreck your friend's life—for if he were really to fall in love with my daughter, it would be such a pity!"

"It's too late to say that," Gilmour replied gravely. "He is deeply in love with her."

"He'll have to get over it," she said bruskly.

"I still don't see why he should have to." Gilmour's face was that of a man who would not easily give up his chosen path. "I don't in the least see why he should."

There was no mistaking the change in Mrs. Pratt's look. For a second she stood pressing her lips together, then she said slowly:

"Does Mr. Haliburton strike you as a man of unlimited patience? He doesn't me."

"He's very good-natured . . ." he began vaguely. Gilmour hardly knew Haliburton.

"He has that reputation," Mrs. Pratt threw in, "but—well—I doubt his standing much nonsense. He's not been accustomed to it. Besides, why should he? And if he let Winnie go——" Her face seemed to grow pinched at the mere words. "No, listen!" she said imperiously, "I'll be quite frank. I'm living on my capital. I was a wealthy girl myself, and married a man who was believed to be well off. So he was—so we both were

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for a time. But we were both extravagant, and when he died I found that even his insurance had been mortgaged. I was left to struggle along with Winnie as best I could, for we neither of us had any relations. Bit by bit my capital has been eaten into, until—well, I can't keep the flag flying much longer. Now Basil Haliburton at the moment would settle half the world on Winnie. And she loves him. In reality." The last two words came defiantly. "Anything else is just play. I want the affair settled when we leave here. And so it will be if you head off your friend."

"But he's quite well to do," Gilmour urged.

"Not as Mr. Haliburton is!" was the unanswerable reply. "Let alone as well off as Basil will be when his grandfather dies."

"I know he has big expectations," Gilmour agreed, "but I assure you that Ingram's means——"

"Are not the kind that I want for Winnie," snapped Mrs. Pratt.

"But perhaps the kind that she wants for herself," came the reply with a smile that Mrs. Pratt called "positively fiendish" in its impudence.

"It's no good, Mrs. Pratt. I'm backing my friend to win."

There was a moment's silence.

"Do you suppose I've endured what I have to be thwarted now—when the struggle is nearly over?" Her tone startled him by its intensity. He saw that he had gone too far.

"Look here, Mrs. Pratt," he spoke in a more conciliatory tone, "give Ingram a trial. You talk as though he were a pauper. He's anything but."

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Again came that snap of her fingers at her side, and suddenly Gilmour guessed—rightly—that Mrs. Pratt had borrowed money on the strength of her daughter's coming engagement to Haliburton. But she only gave him a rather fierce look and moved away. Gilmour looked after her ruefully. He very much disliked unpleasantness.

"Mrs. Pratt seemed peeved with me—just like you," he said under his breath to Moy.

"I don't wonder. You're a sort of involuntary dog-in-the-manger. And she looks a good hater."

"Well, if my corpse is found some fine day lying in the tool shed, you'll know where to look," and Gilmour broke off to watch with open pleasure Ingram capture Miss Pratt and lead her off to the house under the plea of some books having come from Hatchett's and wanting her help to choose a couple for his sister's children.

Ingram led the way into the library which had been handed over to him for his exclusive use all the more absolutely in that no one else wanted it. He was the only member of the five who had to continue his work at The Tall House itself, and it evidently was work that admitted of no putting off. During the day and early evening he might—and did—dance attendance on Winnie Pratt, but from ten onwards every night he shut himself into the library and let nothing disturb him. Sometimes it was long past midnight when he went up to his rooms. No one at the house got up early. Moy talked as though he let the milkman in on his way to his office in Lincoln's Inn, but a quarter to ten was the earliest that ever saw him running down the steps to his little car. At half-past nine Gilmour would have started

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for the tube. Half-past ten saw Haliburton off the premises. Moy sometimes thought that it was because Ingram could be with Winnie so many hours of the day, that he left suppers and the evenings to Haliburton. Certainly as far as the two men were concerned, the balance seemed only too even. Whichever one was with her appeared to be the favored man.

In the library she carefully selected the books whose bindings pleased her the best, and then stayed on listening to Ingram's eager words about the popular book he was planning on the arithmetical aspect of the universe. He was a charming talker and, as she listened, as she watched his rapt eyes, something of the fascination which he could exert over her came back again. No one but Ingram ever talked to Winnie as though she had a brain. He appealed to it, and Winnie's intelligence struggled forward to meet the appeal. Perhaps, too, something was due to Gilmour's flat refusal to be led on her string. At any rate, for the time being, Ingram regained something of his old ascendency over her. There had been a week or two when he had entirely eclipsed Haliburton.

That young man now strolled in and joined in the chat. He seemed genuinely interested in Ingram's talk and gave a little sigh when Winnie drifted out again in answer to Mrs. Pratt's urgent reminder that she and her daughter were due at a friend's cocktail party.

When she was gone Haliburton would have lingered, but Ingram made it clear that he wanted to write a few pages before the post left. As a rule he let no one inside his writing-room. By sheer personality he had established a sort of frozen line at the door across which no

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one stepped uninvited. The door had stood open just now and the room had been free to anyone who cared to step in, but, with the going of Winnie, Ingram changed, as he was wont to change, at his desk. For one thing he seemed to grow years older, for another he tolerated no time-wasters.

Moy was certain that Ingram often locked himself in. He had an idea that the scientist was working against time, or at least working on something where time counted. And apparently that something was to be kept a dead secret until publication. Ciphers, probably, he thought. Once he had heard a sound he knew well enough, the clang of the lid of a deed box and the turning of a key. That was just before Ingram had hurried out to join the others. Evidently Ingram kept his ideas well safeguarded.

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THREE

ALFREDA LONGSTAFF was not happy, and did not look it. But there were possibilities in her pale, dark face. She looked the kind to break records, had she the chance, behind a wheel, or in a 'plane. If so, Fate had not given her much of a hand to play, so far. Alfreda was the only child of the rector of Bispham, and was expected to keep house for her father and mother. She rebelled, naturally, but as no money was forthcoming for any training that would enable her to earn her own living, she had rebelled in vain—though by no means in silence, or in secret. But this last spring she had hoped for a release. Chance had brought down to Bispham a young man whose good looks attracted her immensely. She thought that he cared, too . . . he had come to the rectory in the first place because he heard that the rector played a good game of chess—as he did—but after that Alfreda had flattered herself that Lawrence Gilmour came because of her. He was the only marriageable man of good position and of her own age who had come into her life so far. Alfreda went all out for his capture. He liked games—well,

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she had a one figure handicap and a magnificent serv-ice, and gradually the links and the lawn tennis courts seemed to oust the chess board. She had shown her hand quite openly, sure of her prize. But he had gone away with only the usual civil partings. Flowers and a box of chocolates had come—once. That was over a month ago—a month of the village's open and con-cealed amusement or pity.

She was thinking of Gilmour today, when the secre-tary of the golf club asked her to play a round with a London man whose partner had failed to turn up, as had Alfreda's. Men met on the links meant little, she had found, and this one wore a wedding ring. He had a clever face, she thought, and decided, with one of her inward sighs, that he had not lived all his life in Bis-pham, or he would never look like that. The rector's wife had just been rebuking her daughter that morning because the sugar basins had not been properly filled. Alfreda was expected to see to this. What a life, or rather what a death! thought Alfreda.

She never played better, and Warner, the man from town, was two down at the ninth hole.

"You ought to give me a stroke a hole," he said with a smile, "but then, I'm——"

"Oh, don't say you're feeling ill!" she interrupted almost fiercely.

"Feeling ill?" he repeated wonderingly.

"Whenever I beat a man, he's 'got a touch of liver,'" came the retort, "or he's 'coming down with the 'flu.' Or he's 'most fearfully knocked with the heat,' or his 'wrist is wonky,' or 'one of his knees is giving him

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trouble again.' It's the aim of my life to live long enough to beat a really well man."

Warner burst out laughing. "So a grouch against the world was steeling those wrists," he said placatingly. "Let's have a rest and a talk. You've got me sunk already." He held out his cigarette case.

"But haven't you come down for a game?" She hesitated, taking one.

He shook his head. "For quiet."

"Good Heavens!" She sat so as to face him, her lip curling. "Fancy coming for quiet! Fancy wanting the stuff! Well, you've chosen the right tomb."

"So that's the trouble," he murmured in a kindly tone, "ah, yes, you're straining at your bonds. We all do—did. I'm not sure——"

"Don't tell me that you aren't sure we're not happier when toddling round in pinafores, or lisping our prayers at mother's knee than when sitting on the Woolsack, or hobbling into the House of Lords," she interrupted again, even more hotly than before.

Warner eyed her. He felt a bit sorry for mother. This young lady looked as though she might have an awful temper. There was frustration in her face—and bitterness. She was quite handsome in a hard, clear-cut way. He was not attracted to her. But she had arresting eyes.

"I'm on a newspaper," he said simply, "and naturally the idea of quiet appeals."

"On a newspaper!" She drew a long breath, and almost choked herself with her cigarette. "Heavenly job!"

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"Hardly." His eyes twinkled. "Interesting, if you like. But hardly heavenly."

"What are you? An editor?" She regarded him with envy.

He nodded. "Something of that sort." He was a newspaper proprietor.

"How does one get newspaper work?" she asked breathlessly.

"By writing clever articles," he said vaguely. Suddenly he saw an abyss opening at his feet. "That is to say—for real genius, that's the way," he corrected hastily.

"Oh, genius!" she said heavily. "But—had you genius?" She spoke with an air of sincerity that took the rudeness out of the question.

His shake of the head answered.

"I suppose you had a tremendous lot of determination," she went on, looking thoughtfully at his shovel of a chin. "There's nothing like a will of one's own for getting on, they say."

In Warner's case it had been a will of his uncle's that had deposited him in one of the high places of the newspaper in question. But he nodded. She, too, had a forceful jaw, he thought.

"Tenacity of purpose is necessary, yes," he agreed. Then he changed the subject of his own arrival on the mountain top by saying, "But, besides genius, you know, the thing to do is to be on the look-out for a scoop. By that——" Her ironic gaze told him that even in Bispham that word was familiar.

"I'm afraid there's not much chance of a scoop down here," she said. "My father's sermons, and my mother's

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chats at meetings, hardly lend themselves to that sort of thing. As for crimes—well, it's true a policeman got drunk once, and we still shudder at the tale, but that was years ago, when my father was a boy. The only dramatic happening I remember was when a woman lost her purse on the station platform, and I lent her half a crown—all my worldly possessions. As it was in this part of the world, she returned the money next day."

He laughed too. Then he tilted his cap further over his eyes and said meditatively, "And yet, that's what first gave me my taste for newspaper work, and set me on my feet—a scoop. A body was found floating in the river. Well, it might have been suicide. I worked it up into a three weeks front page thriller." He spoke with pride.

"Was it suicide?" she asked.

"I believe it was." His tone implied that what it really was did not figure in the balance sheet, except as enhancing the credit of the decorations, "but it isn't the facts. It's the way they're handled—treated."

"I see." She sat silent a moment. "But if nothing happens, what does one do to get out of the rut? I should love newspaper work," she finished, in a tone of fervor that was positively alarming—to an editor.

Warner decided to go all out on the scoop theory of advancement. He did not want a young female besieging him with postal packets of manuscript which would probably have no return stamps. He decided to be more wary.

"A scoop is really the only way," he repeated dog-

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matically. "Something mysterious happens, or something that can be made to look so."

"Here in Bispham?" Her tone was raillery itself, but she waved to him to proceed.

"If you're the first in the field you can offer your stuff to almost any newspaper and, later, you can possibly work into a post on it. Now what about finishing the round?"

She played so badly that he knew her mind was wandering. It is a curious fact, he reflected, that your mind may be on something else, and you can do your work quite decently, but let your mind wander ever so slightly at a game, and the game is ruined. Which looks as if games were harder than work . . . a little third article might be made out of the idea, treated humorously . . .

He thanked her when they were back at the clubhouse again, and suggested cocktails. She declined. Her father expected her to be home to pour out tea, but she spoke as though half dreaming. He watched her long stride making for the gate with some misgiving.

"I hope she won't murder the verger so as to qualify for a post with me," he thought. "She looks capable of a good deal."

At the rectory, Alfreda came to a sudden halt in the shabby old hall. Surely she knew that hat, that voice, and stepping through on to the veranda there rose up before her the man whom she had never expected to see again—Lawrence Gilmour. The sun glinted on his brown hair and seemed to shine in his brown eyes. Suddenly a wave of hatred passed over Alfreda such as she had never dreamed that she could feel. He to stand there

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smiling, after leaving her to the tender mercies of the village gossips! For the first time she dared to realize how much she had suffered. In pride, in dismay, in hopes lost, in the pity and the scarcely veiled amusement of the countryside, and which of those two last had been the harder to bear she could not tell. It all welled up inside her now. Usually pale, there was a flush like a soft rose in her thin cheeks, her lips were a vivid bow of color unhelped by any cosmetics. Alfreda did not use cosmetics. They were expensive, and what was the use—at Bispham? Her eyes were sparkling as she looked into his.

"Alfreda!" he said, coming forward and taking her hand. "I find that I can't get on without you. Have you missed me, too?"

She could not speak. She dared not. Words were thronging behind her clenched teeth which it would have been madness to utter. She seemed to be standing outside herself, and she was amazed at what she was watching. A shiver passed over her. Alfreda closed her eyes, and as he put his arms about her, felt as though she could have struck the face bending down to kiss her, and struck it again and again. Hard.

"Why did you leave me?" she asked in a low whisper.

"Because I wanted to be sure. And to give you time to be sure too," he replied gravely. "I am sure now. Will you marry me, darling?"

"No!" she said with a sort of shout, and then saw her mother come into the room. Mrs. Longstaff jumped.

"Alfreda! Mr. Gilmour!"

"Mrs. Longstaff, I've come back to marry the dearest girl in the world."

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Mrs. Longstaff could not conceive of Alfreda in quite that light. "Indeed?" was all she could say for the moment, then came the knowledge of all that this would mean. Only last week the charwoman had ventured to speak pityingly of "Miss Freda" for being so lonely. Her daughter well married. . . . Gilmour was in the Civil Service, and had ample pay . . . there would be no pension for his wife, but he would, of course, carry a handsome life insurance . . .

"My dear children," said Mrs. Longstaff and gave a hand to each. Alfreda took it, and committed herself. After all, anything was better than the life she had been leading—the life with no outlook. Yet she felt for Gilmour only burning resentment. He could have spared her all this, these wounds to her pride, and yet he had not. She would never forgive him. But she would use him. He should be her stepping-stone to something different—larger. She told herself that she did not even believe in his supposed affection for her. It had suited him to play with her and leave her. It now suited him to come back to her . . . what was he saying? He wanted her to come and spend a fortnight in town at a big house in Chelsea which he and some friends had taken furnished for a few weeks. There was a lady staying there, a Mrs. Pratt, who would chaperone her. Perhaps Mrs. Longstaff would ring her up on the 'phone, the number was Flaxman 0000, and perhaps Alfreda would come back with him now, his car could wait. He had really gone into the friendly syndicate because he thought how heavenly it would be to have Alfreda up in town, staying in what would be, for a week, his house. He explained the idea to the two

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women, and Mrs. Longstaff went to the telephone and was soon in talk with Mrs. Pratt.

Mrs. Pratt was charming. She had taken such a liking to young Lawrence Gilmour, "a really delightful young man," and would be very pleased to chaperone Miss Longstaff during her stay at The Tall House. She hoped she could come soon. Her own daughter was there too. In fact, another engagement was expected . . . the two women chatted most pleasantly.

In the veranda Gilmour pleaded his cause.

"I thought, I hoped, I believed you felt as I did," he stammered.

"And you shall suffer as I did!" was her unspoken addition. Aloud she said, "I'll come to The Tall House for a fortnight since you ask me, but I don't promise to marry you, you know. At the end of the time I'll give you my answer."

"Oh, no, no!" he begged. "Surely I've left you time enough to know your own heart. Why, I brought you down this!" He opened a small case and something inside it flashed. Alfreda, for the first time, felt one of the bands of ice around her heart break with a little splintering sound, like the girl in the fairy tale . . . he must really love her to have bought her this . . . it was a charming half-hoop of diamonds. For a second she wavered. A month ago how she would have rejoiced. But four weeks of suffering leave a scar . . . she closed the case with a snap, and returned it to him.

"I'll give you my answer at the end of the fortnight," she said quietly, "and meanwhile I'm to be quite free. I promise nothing, except to come to town." Let him, too, feel the pleasure of uncertainty. "Is that agreed?"

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It was not in the least what he hoped and wanted. But something in her tone warned him not to press her, unless he wanted to lose her. As for Alfreda, suddenly she knew what she wanted. She would go to town for the two weeks, and by hook or by crook at the end of them land a job on a newspaper. As for marriage—she had only wanted it as a key to open the world outside Bispham. Perhaps she could open it for herself by herself.

She refused to go back in his car with Gilmour, and her mother upheld her in this. After all, tomorrow would do quite nicely and one evening would give the two women and a seamstress time enough to alter that frightful evening frock that Alfreda had ordered from the sales because it was so cheap. . . . So Gilmour went off alone, but with the promise that Alfreda would come to town on the following day in time for lunch. He had no doubt as to her ultimate answer, and decided that it was only her girlish way of paying him out for his delay in proposing, little dreaming how exactly he had hit the nail on the head, and yet how he had given it a slant quite off the true. He wanted to tell all the house-party about her, and burst out with the news to Moy that evening after dinner. They were playing billiards together.

"I can't keep it to myself!" Gilmour was playing wildly. "I've as good as got engaged to the dearest girl in the world, and she's coming here on a fortnight's visit. It's still Haliburton's week, but he's an awfully understanding chap . . . I'm not worthy to tie Alfreda's shoe-strings, but—well"—he gave a choked little laugh, "she'll be here in time for lunch tomorrow."

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Moy was intensely interested. How would this Alfreda and the lovely Winnie get on together? He hoped there would be no unpleasantness. So far, things had been such a success. Even Frederick Ingram's presence now and then had done no harm. He was dropping in more frequently with papers for Charles, and would sometimes stay and have a chat or even a bite with the house-party . . . yes, he repeated to himself, everything was going on splendidly. As for Haliburton's kindness in letting Gilmour ask this girl up, Moy liked Haliburton, but in this instance he saw no reason to fall over backwards because of his altruism. Ingram too must be charmed with the notion, he thought. Just then the door opened, and Ingram, looking anything but charmed, stepped in.

"I heard voices, and thought my brother-in-law was here," he explained. "Why do one's relations always want to see one?" he asked in what might be assumed discomfort as he closed the door on himself.

"I'm afraid, if rumor is correct in the case of this particular brother-in-law, it's because he hopes to touch Ingram for a fiver," Gilmour suggested with a grin. Moy nodded agreement. "What between Frederick and his brother-in-law Edward Appleton, Ingram must have plenty of use for his spare cash."

"Yet he was once a first-class actor, I've been told," he said.

"He's a first-class gambler now." Gilmour bent over the table again. "The two don't see much of each other. I don't think Appleton has been to the flat more than twice this year. Now, as to Frederick, he'd live on Ingram's doorstep if he could. After all, poor Apple-

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ton's no one's enemy but his own. Whereas Frederick is a regular out-and-out wrong un."

"It was you who stopped Ingram from putting his money into that silver-fox ranch, wasn't it?" Moy asked. "Ingram consulted us, and, of course, we advised against it. But I rather thought he would do it, until he mentioned next time that you'd shown him regular proofs that it was all a clever swindle."

Gilmour's teeth flashed out of his tanned face for a second. "I showed Frederick up proper, as the Tommies say, and enjoyed it. Mind you, on paper the scheme was beautifully worked out . . ."

"It was." Moy remembered it. "We only advised caution on principle and Ingram refused to hear a word against it at first. Frederick had pleaded with him for a chance to earn an honest living, and Ingram thought if he could settle him in the wilds of Scotland it would be cheap at any price."

"I hated to destroy his dreams of a future home without any Frederick around the corner," Gilmour said sadly, "but I had to do it."

"Did Frederick thank you for it?" Moy asked, grinning in his turn.

"At any rate, he's not the kind to bear malice," Gilmour said easily.

Moy raised his eyebrows. "Think so? For a couple of years, I wouldn't go strolling along the edge of a volcano with him if I were you. Nor play at who can stay down longest under water." But he too was only chaffing and after a few more words about Miss Longstaff, Gilmour went in search of Mrs. Pratt.

Meanwhile Ingram had found his brother-in-law. He

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shook hands, with the look of a man steeling himself against something—himself, or his visitor.

Appleton looked at him very sharply as their fingers touched. Appleton had been a handsome man once, in a rather flamboyant way, and he still carried himself well. But everything about him twitched these days. His face was never still, and when for a moment his features seemed to rest, he would fall to pinching his ear or rubbing his nose with his thin, curved fingers. The hands were those of a fever patient, one would say, so hollow were the backs, so ridged and dry the nails.

He stood looking at the other, as though longing to plunge into some all-absorbing subject of his own, and yet not quite daring to do so. Ingram caught the glance and shook his head with an almost apologetic smile.

"Don't let's talk of it, Edward, there's a good fellow. It's far too dangerous a gift. My sister would never forgive me for one thing. And now, what about cocktails? Will you have them in here or in the garden?"

Appleton did not speak for a moment; he was standing with his face turned to the fireplace, his back to Ingram. After a short pause he said that he would rather stay where they were and, so saying, he began to examine some of the prints on the walls. From them he passed to the furniture. He seemed so appreciative of both that Ingram, apparently anxious to make up for his very definite refusal of something much wanted by the other, took him upstairs, and showed him the floor on which his own bedroom was.

Appleton seemed greatly interested. "I wonder if the chap who owns these would be willing to sell anything," he murmured. Ingram knew that Appleton often acted

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as intermediary in such transactions. The one-time actor had long ago run through the fortune left him and, except for his wife's steady income, his household would have been in straights long ago. Ingram had helped Appleton many a time, and would do so many a time more, but not to any large amount. He had learned that that was folly.

He did not feel at liberty to show him the inside of any of the rooms except his own and Gilmour's, who, he knew, would not mind all the world tramping through his quarters. As it was, the two rooms and the corridor kept them quite a while, for Appleton seemed to have a passion for trying to date furniture. He suggested once or twice that his brother-in-law should leave him, but Ingram assured him that at the moment he had the time to spare. But at last he grew restive and frankly glanced at the clock on the landing below them. Appleton caught the glance. Ingram apologized. "I had no idea the time had flown so," he said then. "As a matter of fact I am rather rushing some work to its end—and to the printers. So if you really won't stop and have a drink? . . ."

Appleton said that he too was rather in a hurry, and took himself off, after insisting that Ingram should not come down with him.

Moy happened to be coming down the stairs as Appleton was shown out. In the shadowy recess of the landing sat Tark, his head bent over his note-book. He seemed to have as much love for figures as had Ingram. Whenever Moy ran across him, if he was by himself, Tark would be writing in his rather large note-book what looked like sets of figures. He would do this in

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the oddest places, perched on the side of a tub, squatting on the stairs or astride the window ledge. Wherever an idea struck him, if idea it was, Tark would bring out his note-book and well-sharpened pencil, and seem to lose the world for some few minutes. He never appeared to be afraid of being overlooked, though, as far as Moy knew, he never talked of what he was entering with such care.

As Appleton took his hat from the butler he turned and faced the landing. At the same second Tark looked down to the front door. The two men looked at one another. It was an odd look, Moy thought, to pass between a couple of strangers, or mere acquaintances. It was so straight and so long and so utterly blank. Then the door closed behind Appleton and Tark, putting his note-book away, ran lightly down the stairs into a little room on the left of the front door. As it happened, Moy was on his way to the room on the right, and there, thinking of Appleton and Tark and that silent look, he glanced through the window netting. Appleton was lighting a cigarette on the pavement. He was just outside the window of the room where Tark was and, as he threw away the match, he looked at it and shook his head with a quick but decided shake, then he walked on. Moy told himself that writing plays, or trying to write them, was bad for one's brain. Appleton was always shaking his head or twitching his forehead or whisking something invisible off his cheek. And as for Tark, his indifference towards his fellow-men was quite real, Moy felt certain, and went to the bone. It was no acquired armor. True, he had seemed at first desirous of talking to Ingram, but that desire was so

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patently not shared by the mathematician that Tark seemed to have quite given up all attempts to have a word alone with him, and now to include Ingram in his cold lack of interest.

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FOUR

EVEN Tark looked quite alert, for him, next day when he came to lunch. Gilmour and his fiancée—for so the household called her—had not yet come in. Mrs. Pratt was radiant and chatting gaily to everyone. Winnie was silent, but her cheeks glowed with so vivid a rose and the color faded so noticeably as the minutes passed that Moy wondered whether Mrs. Pratt had just slapped them. A slanderous thought. They were due to firm applications of a sponge and hot water. When Winnie did talk it was to Ingram, ignoring Haliburton.

Then the door opened and there fell an absolute hush as Gilmour and a lithe, dark-haired, pale girl came in. Every eye was riveted on Alfreda. Even Ingram who had heard her name mentioned in connection with Gilmour some time ago, had never met her, managed to be looking at the door. He was curious to see the face that could eclipse the beauty of Winnie Pratt's. Miss Longstaff stood a second half-smiling at the interest that met her. It was an enigmatic smile, Moy thought. And a rather enigmatic face. Perhaps that was what

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had attracted Gilmour, who began to introduce her to Mrs. Pratt in a boyish way that was very taking.

As for Ingram, he could hardly believe his eyes. He had known beforehand that she would fall short of Winnie's standard, but that this elfish, peaky-faced chit could keep a man from realizing the loveliness of Winnie—why Gilmour must be blind! Haliburton thought the same. Moy too was disappointed. Yet he could see something, that, supposing it appealed to you, would be found in Alfreda's face but not in Winnie's. For one thing Miss Longstaff looked clever, he thought, also discontented—or was it merely dissatisfied? She talked well at lunch, with an air of doing so for her own amusement, not merely to brighten the lives of others. Mrs. Pratt alone had welcomed the newcomer warmly. As for her daughter, after one swift glance at the other girl, she ignored her. Gilmour did not seem even to remember Winnie's existence as he devoted himself to the girl now seated beside him. Once when Gilmour got up to lay her gloves aside for her, she followed his figure with a look that intrigued Moy. There was not a spark of affection in that glance, he would have said, only something coldly inquisitive. She caught his own meditative look full, and in return fixed her own dark, unfathomable stare on him. Neither seemed to wish to be the first to look away. Then she finally turned her head aside to Miss Pratt. Looking at the beautiful curve of the slightly averted fair head there came into Alfreda's face a smile that showed unexpectedly strong white teeth, and there was something else, something sardonic, Moy fancied for an instant, before the smile passed. Miss Pratt seemed to sense it

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too, for she looked around swiftly, came to life, and began to chat and laugh, and finally went off gaily with Alfreda for a trial on the tennis court. There was no question as to who was the better player. Miss Longstaff seemed to have tireless muscles. Moy, watching with the other men, decided that she was playing Miss Pratt as well as the game. She sent her merciless balls at merciless angles and made a pace with which Winnie could not possibly cope. But Winnie fought with unexpected pluck and grit. She did not let any game go without a struggle. At the end, hopeless though it was, she was playing better than at first, that mark of the good fighter. One advantage she had. She looked like a child of sixteen with her tumbled curls against her softly flushed little face. It was wet with exertion, but it only looked like the dew on a flower. Miss Longstaff showed no hint of color in her thin pale cheeks, but she shot a glance at the other when the set was over that looked vexed, Moy thought, and as though something had not turned out quite as she meant it to. Fortunately Winnie took it all with great dignity, Moy thought, until later when he went into the hall to consult an A.B.C. on a side table. From a room beside him a voice which he knew was Winnie's and yet which he hardly recognized as hers.

She was saying: "I won't let her have him! It's no use, mother. She shan't have him!"

"Haven't you got any pride?" came in withering tones from her mother. At least Moy called the tones withering, but Winnie survived. For she said still in that tense, desperate voice: "I won't give him up to her! She doesn't love him. Oh, mother, if it came to a

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test between us, he would see which of us really loved him! A real test would soon prove——"

"I don't recognize you," Mrs. Pratt interrupted in a voice that suggested a genuine difficulty to do this. "He doesn't care for you. He loves this charming young girl."

"Young girl! She's old enough to be his m—well, she's over thirty." Winnie had evidently realized that by no stretch of dislike could Alfreda be Gilmour's mother.

"She's about three years older than you in years I fancy, my dear, but a lot in sense," her mother replied. "The trouble with you, Winnie, is that you're spoiled. You've always had what you wanted, so you're tired of what you can get, and are hankering after what you can't have. Let me tell you, my dear girl, there's nothing more fatal to happiness in man or woman." Mrs. Pratt spoke with real feeling. "The fox was wise who said the grapes he couldn't have were sour. A fool would have set his heart on them just because he couldn't have them. That's what you're doing."

"I'm not! Lawrence Gilmour would love me if I only could show him——"

"You've shown him sufficiently, and everyone else too. Come, Winnie, pull yourself together. Have some pride. Haliburton wants to marry you. But if you keep this sort of thing up he won't feel like that much longer. You ought to show Lawrence Gilmour that though he may not care for you, others do." Mrs. Pratt's tactics were too transparent to succeed, Moy feared. He himself at the moment was no more conscious of the impropriety of listening than if he had been at a theater.

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"But I like Charles Ingram better." Miss Pratt sounded as though she was smiling again. "And he too wants to marry me."

Moy had taken a step sideways and could now see into the room. Mrs. Pratt's face startled him. She stood looking down on the bent head of Winnie as the girl fiddled with something on the mantel as though she could burst out into a perfect flame of violence—vituperation—despair—pleading—but by an effort that was patently all but beyond her, she bit her lip in silence and led the way out through a farther door.

Two mornings later, Alfreda told Gilmour that she would not be able to go with him to a dog show as they had planned, or rather as he had planned for her.

"I've got so much fitting-out to do," she said with one of her unfriendly smiles, "and shan't be visible until one o'clock today." She seemed to have an early morning appointment, for it was only half-past eight when she left the house. She took some care to see that she was not followed, rather an odd idea one would have said, but she saw no one, and tests such as jumping on to a bus at the last moment and off when all but started, which reduced two conductors to close on apoplexy, assured her that no one had any interest in her movements. That ascertained, she made for a tube which landed her at Hammersmith Broadway. Here she turned into a street that was once lived in by city men who wanted the country. At a house with a black door and orange-painted pillars, she ran up the steps, inserted a latch-key with which she did not seem at all familiar, and finally let herself into a hall. A woman in

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a rather elaborate frock for the morning came forward with a mixture of graciousness and condescension.

"Miss Gray, isn't it? Your room's all ready for you. But wouldn't you like to write in the lounge? As I told you yesterday afternoon when you took the room, no one will disturb you there, only Mrs. Findlay ever uses it at this hour, and you'll find it warm and cosy. Better than being in the basement, don't you think?"

"Thanks awfully, I'll try it," Alfreda said brightly. And in a corner of a glassed-in lounge she ensconced herself, writing-pad on knee. But she did not write much. Her dark eyes flashed to and fro about the main corridor which showed through the side of the lounge. Presently the manageress entered with a big stout woman of middle age, who wore a sort of mantilla of black lace on her head fastened to her white hair in front with a large silver star and floating below her waist at the back. Two corkscrew ringlets dangled over each ear.

"This is Miss Gray." The manageress steered the older woman to the newcomer's corner. "She's interested in disarmament too, Mrs. Findlay, so I thought you and she would be congenial spirits." And the manageress left them.

"Oh, do you care too?" Alfreda asked eagerly, scanning the woman in front of her closely. "I didn't know anyone cared—really. Anyone but myself and the man I'm engaged to, Lawrence Gilmour."

"Lots of people care," Mrs. Findlay answered a trifle coldly. She had rather a forbidding eye and jaw. The woman was one of those people who are often pitied for being solitary, but who are that by choice. True, she

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had outlived all her family, and was practically alone in the world, but had she had a host of relations the result would have been the same. Now, after a few moments' silence, she made as if to go out again, but Alfreda sprang up.

"Don't go!" she said appealingly. "I'm so frightfully pleased to have met someone who can tell me about what we women can do. The idea of all these war preparations is awful. Surely, if we band together, we can be of some use."

Mrs. Findlay was conquered for the moment. This was her hobby, or rather it was more than that. It was the window through which her soul drew in a little air and light and so managed to exist in the desert that she had made of the rest of her life. At first reluctantly, then more freely, she let Alfreda draw her out on the subject. Alfreda for her part listened as though to a Sibyl.

"Oh, I would like to join!" she breathed, when Mrs. Findlay mentioned the Women's Peace Movement, of which she was an honorary secretary. "So would Lawrence—Mr. Gilmour. I think you must have seen him at some of the meetings——" and she described Gilmour. Mrs. Findlay looked a trifle impatient. She said that she had not seen any young man at any of their meetings. Something quivered across Alfreda's face and was gone, but whether she wanted to hear an affirmative, or the negative that had been forthcoming, it was difficult to say.

At ten she put her papers together. "I write, you know," she murmured. "Just little things of no account.

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But I might be able to get in some article which would help."

This time it was Mrs. Findlay who looked eager and, on hearing that Alfreda expected to be in the lounge on the following morning at the same hour, said that she would like to continue their talk. Alfreda put her blank paper away in the little basement room that she had taken late yesterday afternoon and hurried to the door. But the manageress stopped her.

"I saw you having quite a nice chat," she said pleasantly, "and to no one else does Mrs. Findlay ever open her mouth. I told her it would be a change for her to meet someone who shared her interests. Generally she just sits there while her room is being aired, and we daren't talk to her."

Alfreda nodded and hurried off, her face a mixture of emotions; she jumped on a bus that would take her close to The Tall House, satisfaction and dissatisfaction were to be read in her quick, dark eyes. But at nine on the following day she was in the lounge again, and again she and Mrs. Findlay talked of peace, and of how to stop the preparations for war that were darkening all the world.

The next morning after that Mrs. Findlay referred to some books she had in her room, and Alfreda seemed so keen on seeing them that, after a second's hesitation, she asked the younger woman in to a large dreary bed-sitting-room as it is called. The books in question were stacked on a table, and Alfreda promptly took off the top one.

"May I take this home and read it?" she begged. "I'll bring it back tomorrow morning."

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"Tomorrow a friend is coming to see me about this time," Mrs. Findlay said in her stiff way. "As a matter of fact he too has just read that book."

"Can't I run in and hand it to you?" Alfreda asked, her face all innocence.

"I'm afraid my friend is elderly, and has so few minutes to spare, and counts too much on finding me alone," Mrs. Findlay said coldly, and she remained very cool for the rest of the time that Alfreda as usual spent with her, and when the girl left with the book, rather earlier than usual, Mrs. Findlay stopped for a word with the manageress in the hall.

"That Miss Gray who's just come seems rather a pushing young person," was her remark. "I'm afraid she'd be quite a nuisance if I weren't leaving next week. Please don't let her know I'm going; she's quite capable of asking herself down to my cottage in the country."

"I wouldn't breathe a word about your going," the manageress assured her. Mrs. Findlay had the largest room in the house, had taken it at a time when rents were at their highest, and, therefore, paid nearly double what it would now bring. Besides, she was leaving, she had just had an unexpected windfall, and the manageress hoped that some parting present might brighten her own none too gay lot.

"How did she come to speak to you about me in the first place?" Mrs. Findlay asked.

"She came in just after you the other afternoon. She was looking for a room, and after she had taken hers, we stood a moment chatting, and she said she thought she had seen you at Spiritualistic séances near here. I told her I didn't think that at all likely."

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"Preposterous!" chimed in Mrs. Findlay.

"She said something about the star you wear, and I told her that was the Star of Peace, and that you were tremendously keen on there being no more wars, and disarmament and so on. . . . She hardly let me finish, she was so eager to tell me that she and a gentleman friend, a Mr. Gil—something, I think that was the name, were both so keen on that too. She said she'd like ever so much to have a chance of talking to you. That you looked so clever she'd love to hear your views."

Mrs. Findlay's face relaxed.

"Well, of course, it was quite natural, under the circumstances I mean, for you to have introduced her that first morning . . . the truth is," Mrs. Findlay lowered her voice, "I wondered if she had got on the track of that little money I came into so unexpectedly the other day . . . it's to be paid me shortly and I——" she stopped herself.

"Oh, no! No one knows about that! You said it was strictly confidential!" the manageress assured her. "I do hope this Miss Gray hasn't been troublesome. She seemed quite the lady."

"Oh, I don't doubt it's all right, just youthful fervor"—Mrs. Findlay smiled a little at her—"but somehow, it seemed to me so sudden . . . and so very pronounced . . ." She half-stopped herself. "I felt doubtful of her sincerity," she finished, "but, as you say, it's probably just her way. But don't let her take to coming to my room. Should she ever speak to you about it, while I'm still here, please discourage her. I did ask her there just now in a moment of weakness, but she's such a stayer . . . and I'm so busy getting my

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things together . . . she spoke of coming in tomorrow morning, for instance, but I told her I should be engaged. Poor old Mr. Nevern would be quite swamped by her. It's his day to drop in for an hour . . ." and with a nod Mrs. Findlay swept on to her room and castle.

The manageress passed the conversation on to the head housemaid, her trusted assistant.

"Funny!" that young woman murmured. "I mean Miss Gray being so keen on Mrs. Findlay. She's not everybody's fancy, is she? I wonder if she has heard about that money and is making up to Mrs. Findlay because of it."

"She can't possibly know. And don't forget, you don't know anything about it, either!" the manageress warned her.

"Mrs. Findlay told me about it herself, just now. Said she had come in quite unexpectedly for some money and might easily come in for more. Said she was going round the world. I said I didn't wonder. I'd go round the world twice over if only someone would leave me a five-pound note for doing it. Wouldn't you?" and the talk drifted to what one would do if one came into wealth.

As the days passed, Winnie and Alfreda avoided each other, but when they met they were quite civil, especially Alfreda, who went out of her way to be nice to the other. She openly admired her beauty, and spoke of feeling as though Winnie were a lovely flower to be shielded from rough winds, something fragile that no tempest should touch. This much was gained by Alfreda's presence, that Miss Pratt spoke very little to

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Gilmour. She really retired into something resembling polite sulks, talking to Ingram, but hardly deigning to see Haliburton, and spending most of her time at other houses. As for Miss Longstaff, Moy thought her in her own way as aloof as Tark, but with something watchful added. She would fix that odd unreadable stare of hers now on one, now on another of the house party as though trying to understand something which puzzled her.

Frederick Ingram came more frequently to the house now. He avoided Gilmour as much as possible, but when the two met they seemed to be able to meet on a footing of indifferent civility. Miss Longstaff appeared rather to like Frederick, and as that young man was fond of an audience, he would often be found by her side if Miss Pratt were out of reach. He did not stay at The Tall House, but came and went, taking and bringing papers to his half-brother.

It was just a little over a week after Alfreda's arrival when all happened to be in the lounge around six. The cocktails had been handed about, and the talk turned on ghosts. No one afterwards seemed able to remember exactly how it started. Someone—Moy said he thought it was Tark, Tark said it was Haliburton, Haliburton maintained that it was Frederick, Frederick insisted that it was Gilmour, and Gilmour said that he felt sure it was Ingram—mentioned that a man whom he had met lately had spoken to him of what a splendid display Appleton used to give as a ghost in a Grand Guignol play. But all agreed that it was Frederick who said that The Tall House had a ghost, that one of its former owners had been found hanged. It was suspected though

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never proved that his valet did the hanging. The old man's ghost was said to walk.

Ingram said that a ghost was always part of the furniture of an old house, and asked Moy whether on the expiration of a tenancy it had to be handed back in the same condition as when taken over.

"Fair wear and tear excepted," Moy said at once, amid laughter.

"A safe provision," Haliburton pointed out, "as nothing could damage ghostly bones or clothes, not even bullets."

"The ghost had better not bank on that," Gilmour said with a most unaccustomed edge to his voice. "Personally, if I meet one, I shall fire at sight."

Something in his tone made the group fall silent.

"How will you let the ghost know of its danger beforehand?" Winnie asked with one of her tinkling laughs. "By a notice to the Psychical Society?"

"I think I have given notice by what I am saying." Gilmour's tone was still hard. "There aren't such things as real ghosts, there are only practical jokers. And, as I say, I warn any joker here that that particular piece of foolishness isn't a safe one to play on me."

"You seem rather warm about it," Ingram said dryly.

"Sorry!" Gilmour's tanned face looked apologetic. "I'm afraid I did rather get on my hind legs, but I was badly frightened by a so-called ghost as a kid, and the mere mention of them makes me see red ever since."

He looked round for Miss Longstaff. But that young lady had moved behind him to an open window. She was standing very rigid, her head and chin stuck out

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at an angle that was not at all pretty, but which suggested breathless excitement. One hand was fingering a string of beads she wore; it had an effect of being pressed against her heart. Moy remembered afterwards that not till the talk changed did she relax that absorbed pose of hers. Gilmour, still without seeing her, rose and left the lounge. Frederick Ingram followed him for a moment.

"He means it right enough," he said, coming back. "He's got it into his head that one of us is going to play that same prank on him again, and he wants everyone to know that he really intends to shoot at sight. I think he suspects me."

"Is he a good shot?" Tark asked in his creaky, expressionless voice. Everyone laughed.

"Very," Ingram spoke up now. "Very," he repeated, looking sharply at his brother. "But I don't think I'm giving anyone much of a surprise when I add that his revolver is loaded with blank."

"Blank or loaded, I have no intention of amusing Gilmour," Frederick said promptly. "But it's as well for the rest of you to know that you needn't drop on the floor when you hear a bang."

Ingram turned away and picked up a book near him. When he was not writing he was sure to be reading, Winnie had once told him. She crossed to his side now.

"I can't imagine you without books." She smiled at him one of her softest, most radiant smiles.

"Let's take a turn in the fresh air," he said under his breath. "Somehow the air in here's a bit hot . . . electric . . . but as to being without books, there are other things I couldn't live without. When this month

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is up, Winnie"—he had never called her by her first name before—"how are you going to choose?"

"My mother wants me to marry Basil Haliburton," she said evasively.

"Are you going to?" he asked, standing still and taking hold of a spray of Bokhara vine.

"You've spoiled matters," she said with one of her most flirtatious upward glances. "But for you, I shouldn't have hesitated. Until you came, I felt so sure I cared for him."

"What about Lawrence Gilmour?" The question came before he could check it. She cocked a supercilious chin at him.

"Lawrence Gilmour? Why, he's engaged. It isn't because of Mr. Gilmour that I'm not sure what I shall say to Basil Haliburton."

Even the adoring Ingram looked a bit doubtful, and the chin swept up still more.

"You alone complicate matters," she said softly and yet rather wearily. As she spoke they turned a corner and almost stepped on Haliburton himself. It was an awkward meeting. Even Winnie was nonplussed for a second, then she made some remark about the flowers, and the evening light, and the young man took it up pleasantly, but he avoided looking, or speaking, directly to Ingram.

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FIVE

THAT night Moy was awakened by the last sound that the young solicitor ever expected to hear in a house—the sound of a shot. With it came a loud cry and then a thud.

Still rigid with bewilderment, he heard a sort of sobbing falsetto:

"Where's the light? God, where's the switch?" The voice seemed that of a stranger and yet there was something about it which reminded him of Gilmour.

Moy came to life and sprang out of bed. He rushed into the passage. Bright moonlight flooded it. Just in front of him was the big main passage leading down to Gilmour's room, the door of which faced him across the landing at the farther end. Halfway down the passage was Ingram's room and it was in front of that room that something bulky and white was lying.

Coming towards Moy and towards the heap on the ground, staggering as though he were drunk, and clawing at the wall with his left hand, was a man in pajamas. The right hand was outstretched and held something small that glittered in the cold, white light:

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