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DEATH AT WINDWARD HILL

HELEN JOAN HULTMAN

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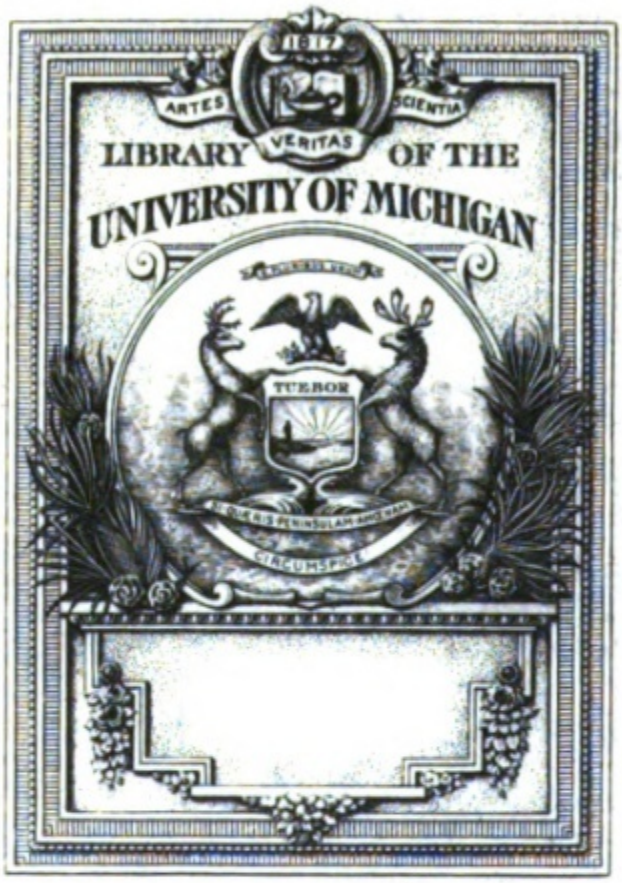

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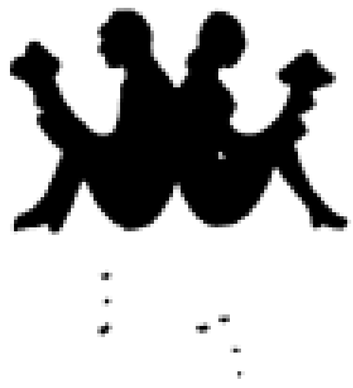
DEATH AT WINDWARD HILL

BY

HELEN JOAN HULTMAN

AUTHOR OF "FIND THE WOMAN," ETC., ETC.



THE FICTION LEAGUE
61 East 11th Street, New York
1931

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C. F. TITLE
DEATH
5-6-40

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CHAPTER I

DEATH COMES

THE night that Miss Eugenia Marrender died was cold and stormy. Windward Hill, the house wherein she lay, caught the full fury of the weather. The old brick house stood starkly upon its hilltop, half hidden by a row of ragged sycamores and a few pines which emphasized its bleakness rather than suggested a sheltering windbreak.

The soughing of the wind through the pines and the monotonous creaking of a loose shutter had got upon the nerves of Doris Randall, R.N., until she could no longer sleep as soundly as she ought to. She was on a hard case, a case which could only grow worse as time went on. Doris wondered why she had let herself in for anything as disagreeable and uninteresting as looking after Miss Eugenia Marrender. That is, she pretended to wonder about the matter at those times when she forced herself not to think about Dr. Perry Stuart. Most of the time she frankly admitted to herself that she had come to Windward Hill just because Dr. Stuart had asked her to . . . to nurse a crabbed old woman, who would undoubtedly die of an incurable disease within the next six months.

Shortly after ten Doris had settled her patient for the night, and had gone across the hall to the room which Miss Marrender had directed her to occupy when

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she first came on the case. Doris knew that this arrangement could not last much longer. She dreaded the time when she must sleep on a cot in her patient's room. She must ask Dr. Stuart about a night nurse. The Marrenders were not the people to make an item of added expense.

Doris shivered as she undressed and crawled into bed. Windward Hill . . . cold, creepy place on a night like this. She could hear Cubbage disturbing the furnace, but Doris knew that meant a diminution of heat. Cubbage and his cautious spoonful of coal. . . . The next time Miss Marrender's nephew came home she'd try complaining to him. Much good it would probably do, though. Gene Tracy was queer. . . .

Doris Randall so labelled all men who failed to make the proper response to her dimples and long-lashed brown eyes. All men except Perry Stuart. . . . As long as Dr. Stuart considered her his favorite nurse the daily round brought her something worth working for. She snuggled deeper in the blankets. That devilish wind. . . . She drifted off to sleep.

Perhaps two hours later Doris roused a bit and lay tense for a minute or two. It wasn't the wind, though it still howled persistently. Yet she knew she had heard something besides the single stroke of the clock in the lower hall—something like the closing of a door somewhere down within the old house. Probably it was that shuffling Cubbage. He was always prowling around, day and night. Yet Dr. Stuart himself had said something to her about the servant's being the only one who appeared genuinely concerned about Miss Marrender's failing health. The nieces and nephews who occasionally called or telephoned a punctilious inquiry would be very

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fond indeed of dear Aunt Eugenia about the time her estate was settled. Doris's thoughts drifted cynically. Even Gene, who lived at Windward Hill, acted as if he despised his aunt. Much Miss Marrender seemed to care, though. She rarely mentioned her relatives and when she did there would be a hard smile on her thin, bloodless lips and an inscrutable expression in her cold eyes.

Doris pulled her attention back to the noise that had wakened her. At any rate, she had not heard it again. She stirred reluctantly, slipped into bathrobe and slippers, and crossed the hall to her patient's open door. She was supposed to do this several times during the course of every night. She did it every time she woke up. Most nights she was not particularly restless. It was the wind in the pines tonight, Doris assured herself . . . not the biting memory of the gorgeous woman she had seen with Dr. Stuart that afternoon while she was doing her errands in town.

All was quiet in the square, high-ceilinged room where the mistress of Windward Hill was spending the last days of her life. The little light on the bedside table burned steadily. By its dim light Doris could see plainly enough from the doorway that everything was as it should be. Dr. Stuart had said not to rouse Miss Marrender for medicine during the night hours if she was resting quietly. In spite of the wind and the banging shutter she was certainly having a good sleep. . . . That noise must have been Cubbage. If he had been down at the furnace, she'd forgive him his everlasting pussy-footing around. Ugh-h! How cold it was in this drafty upper hall. The wind was stronger than ever.

Doris Randall crept shivering back to her blankets. She buried her head deep in the pillows and allowed

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herself to think long delicious thoughts about Perry Stuart. Once more she fell into heavy sleep.

It was a little after four o'clock when the little nurse next awoke. As far as she could tell, nothing in particular had aroused her. The howling wind had fallen. A cold, dark silence gripped the house on Windward Hill. Once more she dragged herself from the warmth of her bed across the icy hall to Miss Marrender's room. Again she stood at the door and looked at the still figure under the mound of bed clothing.

After an irresolute moment Doris approached the bed. She bent and looked sharply at the thin face sunk in the pillow and touched the inert eyelids. With stiff fingers she groped for the pulse in the shrivelled neck. She had not been mistaken in her first impression. Miss Eugenia Marrender was dead.

"She died in her sleep. Lucky, at that. . . ." Doris pulled her professional self together. She might be Dr. Stuart's favorite nurse, but experience had not yet calloused her. So, stifling a desire to run from the room, she made methodical note of the time according to her watch and then felt for the electric switch by the door. Hard light flooded the room from a pendant center fixture, an incongruous note in the otherwise perfect 1880 furnishings of the chamber.

Not until the brilliant light illumined every corner of the room did the nurse see anything significant about the little table upon which the medicines were arrayed. There were the carafe and glass, both quite as she remembered leaving them at ten o'clock. There was the bottle containing the special prescription that was administered before the sick woman's meals. That, too,

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was just as she had left it at six the evening before. It was the bottle of white pills that looked different.

Doris knew the technical name of the drug that the tablets contained; she knew, too, why one or at most two of them were all she dared give a patient, no matter how bad the pain was. . . . Miss Marrender had been having the pills regularly. Only yesterday afternoon during her two hours off Doris had gone into town to renew the prescription in accordance with Dr. Stuart's instructions. It was while she was waiting that she had seen the doctor with a woman, a blonde too beautiful to add much confidence to long-lashed brown eyes.

With a jerk Doris brought her attention back to the immediate problem. After she had returned from the druggist's and replenished the bottle, it was more than half full. But now. . . . With curious distaste she picked it up. The bottom of the small phial was barely covered by the powerful little globules. Three, four, five, six . . . and last night there had been surely three times that number.

Once again Doris Randall looked searchingly at the peaceful dead face of Eugenia Marrender. "I don't blame her . . . the game old sport!" she half whispered to herself.

For a moment longer she stood staring at the rigid mound, the bottle clutched in her hand. A momentous decision faced her. What difference would it make? Such a little thing for her to do for Perry Stuart. He'd never know that she had done it, though. It would have to be her own secret happiness. Something to remember. . . . An instant of clairvoyant insight told Doris Randall that Perry Stuart's life had no place for her adoring love.

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Her decision was made. She'd say nothing about the pills. No one needed to know how strangely their number had lessened. She must wake Cubbage, and then she must report the death of the patient to the doctor. He would not be surprised to hear what had happened. He had told her about the patient's heart condition when she came on the case. That was the reason that the white pills need not be mentioned. There would be no question of suicide . . . no need for coroners. A doctor whose reputation was on the up-grade as was Perry Stuart's avoided that kind of publicity whenever he could.

Gathering the folds of her blanket robe tightly about her slender figure, Doris sped down the dark, cold hall. Cubbage's room was downstairs at the end of the back hall, across from the kitchen and pantries. Stabbing lights on ahead of her, she made her way down the steep front flight. As she turned toward the back hall she saw almost immediately that Cubbage's door was open. She hesitated a moment, and then stepped across his threshold as far as was necessary to reach the swung-back door panel. Her rat-tat-tat was brisk. There was no answer. Once more she beat her tattoo. No sound answered from within, but a stealthy shuffle behind her brought her heart into her mouth.

With a strangled scream she whirled about. There stood Cubbage, a shapeless blur against the light.

"What is it, Miss Randall?" His voice, as always, sounded incongruous to Doris's ears. There was a faint echo of culture about it that was not in keeping with the menial position the man filled.

"It's Miss Marrender . . . she's dead. I have just discovered it and I wanted you to know at once. When I

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looked in at about one everything was all right. She was sleeping quietly. Just now when I went in I found —that she was gone."

"Are you sure that she was—all right at one o'clock, nurse?"

There was something about the accent of the words that sent a new chill down Doris's spine. Probably that was the reason she lied, promptly and convincingly.

"Quite sure, Cubbage. I was right over her, you see. Her respiration was better than it had been all week." Doris wondered afterwards how she could have been so glib.

"Ah-h. . . ." It was more like an expelled breath than a spoken syllable. "Would you like some coffee, Miss Randall?"

"Please! I must put in a call for Dr. Stuart. Maybe you'd better notify the relatives."

"I doubt if you can reach the doctor at—at this hour, though of course I can understand why you want to try. . . ."

Doris Randall gripped herself hard to keep from hysterics. There was something vaguely menacing about Cubbage. If only he would not talk in that curiously precise way. ". . . Mr. Tracy is expected today, quite fortunately. I should prefer to wait for his orders."

Doris fled to the front hall to the telephone. There was no need for her to waste time searching the directory for a number. She knew the whole series that could bring to her the sound of Perry Stuart's voice—his offices, the hospital, his club, his apartment. At this early hour it was only logical to begin with his apartment. She could hear a bell give a distant, vigorous peal. A sleepy voice answered. It belonged to Scotty, a

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derelict veteran that the doctor had salvaged from a rehabilitation hospital. Scotty's burr informed her that Dr. Stuart had been out all night on an emergency call and had just tumbled into bed within the hour. "I'll no be calling him," he declared.

"You don't have to, silly. Just tell him at your very first opportunity that Miss Marrender died during the night, and that the nurse is waiting for further instructions."

Shaking with cold Doris turned toward the stairs. She'd rather go back to that gaunt, old-fashioned room with its silent occupant than stay down here within sound of Cubbage's muted voice. As she reached the head of the steep flight she plunged her stiff hands into the pockets of her bathrobe. Her fingers closed upon the smooth coldness of the bottle of powerful medicine which she had dropped into one of the pockets when she left in search of Cubbage. At this reminder of the narcotic the pretty arch of her eyebrows met in a troubled frown.

"I might as well," she concluded. "It's as good a way as any. . . ." With that she slipped into a bathroom and emptied the remaining tablets into the drain of the toilet. With a decisive hand she flushed the deadly pellets into nothingness. Then she reentered the dead woman's room and replaced the empty bottle beside its companion on the bedside table. "There's no reason to hide it," she argued with the insistent question that welled within her.

She must go to her room and dress. As she turned away from the little table she saw what was lying just under the edge of Miss Marrender's bed. Strange that she had not noticed it before. . . . She stooped and picked

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it up. What she held in her hand was a fountain pen, a stalwart, masculine pen, a pen that she had seen racing across prescription pads many times—Perry Stuart's pen. The gold band about its dull green cap was initialled, but it did not take the inscribed P. S. to assure Doris Randall of its owner. She would have known that pen out of a thousand. Anything that was Dr. Stuart's spoke with tongues to her.

He must have dropped it when he made his last call on Miss Marrender. That had been yesterday morning. Already death had placed a singular remoteness upon preceding events. Yet how strange that she had not seen it before. . . . It must have been caught in a fold of the bed clothing. Of course that was it, she thought, and dropped the pen into the bathrobe pocket. Her hand lingered to caress it. She refused to let herself recall that she had arranged the bedding thoroughly when she settled her patient for the night. Surely she should have noticed the pen then. . . . Drains and plumbing were not the oubliettes for heavy, masculine fountain pens. After all, it was his pen—*his* pen. Having it to keep for her very own would add a little to that scant store of secret happy memories that she feared would be all she would ever have of Perry Stuart.

Rapidly the little nurse dressed for daytime appearance. Winter daylight was still more than two hours' away, but the circumstances made her dishabille inappropriate. In uniform she felt equal to Cubbage. As she stepped about her room she was vaguely conscious of sounds of dim confusion from the rooms below. Just like the man to turn the house upside down in an orgy of cleaning.

The fragrance of his coffee called her down. The

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warmth of the kitchen was comforting. She was finishing her second generous cup when the telephone bell rang imperiously. Cubbage tiptoed away to answer it. It was several minutes before he returned. "It's for you, Miss Randall," he reported.

"That you, Doris?" It was the doctor's hearty voice. "Scotty found that I had come to long enough to give me your message. Heart, was it? I'm not surprised. . . . She's escaped a lot of hideous suffering. I'll be out later on. I'm operating this morning. . . . But what I really called you about is this: could you hustle into town and make the 8:47 train? It's a case down at Paloma. I'd like mighty well to turn it over to you and now that you're free. . . . It won't be hard—the chap's convalescent. Who are you to turn snooty about Florida in February. . . . Good for you, little girl. I may get down myself for a couple of weeks next month. . . . Thanks a lot, Doris. You're a little peach. Taxi in to my office and Jeannette will give you all the dope. . . . Bye!"

Doris replaced the receiver, scarcely knowing what she had said. To go to Paloma on a case. . . . What a wonderful opportunity for her to forget the nightmare of the last few hours. But she mustn't think he meant anything by the way he talked. He always talked that way . . . to all the girls he liked . . . and he liked so many. No doubt there was the same intimate caressing quality in his voice when he talked to gorgeous ladies like the one she had seen him with yesterday. . . .

An outer door banged, recalling Doris from her impossible dream world. Heavy steps creaked into the kitchen. Mrs. Banney had arrived. This was one of her regular days and she always came early. Before Cubbage

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could have had a chance to tell her what had occurred at Windward Hill during the night, Doris could hear the woman's brisk comment.

"Well, it sure looks to me like you folks think it's the good old summer-time with your side windows standing wide open and the curtains blowing in and out. I had to laugh as I come round the house just now. Knowing you, Cubbage, I figured it couldn't be because the house had got so warm you had to cool it off, and knowing Windward Hill I couldn't hope for anything as exciting as somebody trying to break in and steal—"

There was a muted murmur from Cubbage and a sudden silence from Mrs. Banney, a silence from which the woman soon recovered. Doris scurried upwards to her own room. There was packing to do. Just like Cubbage to send Mrs. Banney into hysterics. . . . Listen to the poor creature. . . . Doris slapped open a suitcase. Thank goodness, she'd soon be on her way.

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CHAPTER II

THE NURSE GOES

THE nurse's thoughts raced on as she slid into street clothes and tossed her belongings into her bag. She must allow time to stop at the doctor's office before making the 8:47 train. Jeannette would help her out. She'd have to ask her to see about the uniforms that were at the laundry and the check that would be coming from the Marrenders.

Suitcase in hand she left her room. Unconsciously she tiptoed by the closed door behind which lay the stark body of Eugenia Marrender. She must call a taxi. . . . But just before she reached the bottom of the long dark stairs, she heard Cubbage at the telephone.

". . . the circumstances demand investigation, Inspector."

Those were the only words that Doris Randall heard, for the man who spoke them slipped the receiver into place the instant he realized that she could hear what he was saying.

She set her suitcase down, and the man gave the pretty nurse a long questioning look. "You are leaving? So soon?" The words were plainly intended to have the insinuating sound that Doris flamed under.

"I am only following Dr. Stuart's orders, Cubbage. He asked me to come into town at once. He has another urgent case for me." Why must she explain? she asked

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herself hotly. He was only the serving man. However, she added, "My charts and reports will of course be turned in to him."

Abruptly she seized the telephone and called the number of the taxicab company. That done, she again turned toward the stairs but stopped once more in spite of herself to address the stiff figure indistinct in the gloom of the hall. "If there is anything you'd like to have me do. . . . But I advise leaving Miss Marrender just as I found her till the doctor comes."

"By all means—just as you found her." Cubbage's reply echoed curiously. "I was just about to call the residence of Mr. William Marrender. I waited this long so as not to disturb him too early."

Doris sought the kitchen to wait until the taxi came. It was warm there and Mrs. Banney was better company than Cubbage. She found the room unoccupied. Mrs. Banney's spotted brown serge in which she made her daily trips from Canal Corner to Windward Hill was hanging on its usual hook, but her limp-brimmed hat and old plush coat were not there. "She must have gone back to the Corner to get extra help," she murmured half aloud.

A raucous signal from the front announced the arrival of her cab. As she sped for the last time through the hall, it lay dim and silent. Cubbage was not in sight, but she heard vague sounds of occupancy behind a closed door to her left. Snatching a pair of gloves from the table under a gilt-framed mirror she was for an instant conscious of an odor reminiscent of cigarettes. It couldn't be Cubbage; he never smoked cigarettes. Besides, this was definitely a stale odor. . . . Then she

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pulled open the heavy front door and gestured impatiently to the driver of the taxi.

It was a relief to be leaving Windward Hill. Miss Marrender had been a difficult patient. For all her money the house was a gloomy, drafty horror. Gene Tracy, little as she had seen of him in the weeks that she had been at Windward Hill, impressed her as a restless, unhappy man, and Cubbage—Cubbage was a nightmare. The mere thought of Florida was bracing. Very likely Dr. Stuart would be running down too, for golf or polo. . . . Rather awful to grow old and die, as Miss Marrender had, and no one in the family really sorry. They'd be thinking only of her money. That niece would, at any rate, the one who had stormed so, only yesterday morning. . . .

The taxi lurched into the highway that would soon bring her to the suite of offices occupied by Dr. Stuart. Mechanically Doris began to draw on her gloves and, as she did so, she came to alert attention. The soft tan suede glove into which she was thrusting her capable fingers was not hers. Her own gloves were in her bag—of course they were. She distinctly recalled looking at them up in her room and thinking, that after one more wearing, she must clean them.

These gloves that she had picked up from the old walnut table in the hall at Windward Hill were not hers. They were easily a size too small, for one thing. They were quite new, too, and faintly redolent of an exotic sachet. Doris opened her bag. There were her gloves, just where she had thrust them. The two pairs were the same sort of suède and nearly the same shade. A quick examination of the strange pair showed no distinguish-

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ing marks upon them other than the maker's stamp and size number.

A memory flashed distinctly to the surface. When she returned from town the afternoon before, she knew there had been nothing on the old table—she could still see the late sun falling across the bare polished wood as Cubbage opened the door to admit her. Whose gloves were they? There had been no other women in the house after that—except herself, and the gloves were too small for her, and Mrs. Banney, who never wore gloves of any sort, and old Miss Marrender, lying helpless in her bed.

Thoughtfully Doris folded the bits of soft leather and tucked them down into her bag. She drew out her own familiar pair just as the cab stopped before the building that housed Dr. Stuart's offices.

She found Jeannette just taking off her street clothes. "In one minute, Miss Randall. Yes, the doctor called me about you. That's why I'm down here so bright and early. I've got the notes on the case all ready for you and the doctor 'phoned that he'd meet you at the station to see about tickets and so on. It's a rush case, I'd say, but take it from me, old dear, it sounds gr-rand. A young man, not married, lots of money—all that at the swankest hotel in Paloma. . . . I'll say you're Dr. Stuart's pet nurse."

Fifteen minutes later Doris Randall found herself at the station, and there, just stepping out of his smart coupé, was Dr. Perry Stuart. He was tall and handsome; women patients thought his slightly supercilious manner attractive. As he swung toward Doris, he gave her the quick, individual smile that always made her blood race.

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"That's the girl," he said, giving her arm a friendly squeeze. "Heaven fend me from the kind of female that has to have yards of explanations about everything that isn't exactly routine. This is rushing you dreadfully, I know, but I also know that I can always count on you."

She smiled up at him happily, forgetful of everything except that she was with him. "Never apologize for sending anyone to Florida in February. I'm chortling with joy."

"Not Florida, Doris—California. Did I say Florida? It's California, little sport. A gorgeous place close to San Diego. Your news about Miss Marrender must have twisted my tongue. Right-o, that's your train being called this minute. You'll get the Forty-niner out of Chicago tonight. I'll keep in touch with you by wire. It's not a hard case, but I had special orders to supply a good-looking nurse—and you're it with me, but you know that."

The lazy, beguiling voice dropped a note and for an instant Doris Randall thought she was going to be kissed. "Here, Red Cap—" The high moment was over.

Expertly he turned her over to the porter. "I must dash out to Windward Hill now and then back to the hospital. The old girl was damn lucky to have that heart condition, considering what was ahead of her."

A surge of travelers pushed Doris through the gates and separated her from Dr. Stuart. She stood in the vestibule of the Pullman, trying to catch a last glimpse of him, but he had disappeared.

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CHAPTER III

MRS. BANNEY SCREAMS

NO sooner had Doris Randall stepped into the taxi that had borne her away from Windward Hill than the door to the left at the foot of the stairs opened and Cubbage emerged. One gloved hand was closed about a small box. With the other, likewise gloved, he shot home a heavy bolt on the door through which he had just appeared. Tiptoeing softly down the hall he assured himself that Mrs. Banney was not about. Indeed he had himself suggested that under the circumstances it might be well for her to go after her daughter-in-law as extra help for the next few days. Returning from the kitchen he ascended the stairs and entered the room that had so lately been vacated by the pretty little nurse. He closed the door behind him. It was twenty minutes later when he reappeared.

Shortly after, when Mrs. Banney and Mabel, her comatose daughter-in-law, had creaked into the kitchen, their superior officer was in the silver closet, decorously considering the necessity of rubbing up an extra set of forks. The voice of authority issued orders about curtains in the long drawing-room, slip-covers for the damask chairs, extra boards in the dining table. . . . "It is rather difficult to say just how many will be here for luncheon, but we must be ready—the relatives, you know."

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Mrs. Banney and Mabel yearned to talk it all over with someone, but there was nothing encouraging about Cubbage. However, the older woman could not restrain one question. "Did them burglars take anything?"

"As to that I am not in a position to say, Mrs. Banney. The police are sending out a man—I judged it my duty to notify them. In the light of Miss Marrender's death, let us hope that we are not plunged into any unnecessary publicity."

The two women nodded in timid respect. In spite of his diction he had made them feel that gossip about Windward Hill affairs would be ill-advised.

At that moment a bell pealed shrilly. "The police, I anticipate," murmured Cubbage and left the kitchen to answer the summons.

It was Tim Asher from Headquarters who was waiting for admittance. He had been sent, and he knew it, because the call concerned a Marrender. Otherwise one of the cubs could have handled a sneak thief case and Tim could have been spared a bleak trip.

The door swung open and a butler, who looked like a stage clergyman, permitted the deputy inspector to enter. Asher identified himself briskly and asked, "What's the trouble here?"

"The house appears to have been broken into, officer. I can tell you scarcely more than that because"—Cubbage paused and cleared his throat deprecatingly—"because my attention has been otherwise claimed. I must inform you before you proceed further that Miss Marrender, whose residence this is, died this morning about four o'clock. She had been lying mortally ill for some time."

"That so? Too bad. . . ." Asher's voice fell in ap-

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propriate regret. Then he snapped back officially, "Who are you?"

"Cubbage, sir. In charge of domestic arrangements. If there were a larger staff I should call myself butler."

Asher's eyes surveyed the man. A servant, and yet not quite the type. At least, he was not interviewing a relative. He let himself out a notch. "So the old lady's gone, is she? Let's see, she must be the old maid sister that had got kind of queer—only when you have a million you're called eccentric, huh? Her brothers are all dead, long ago, but there's a lot of the younger generation in town yet, if I'm not mistaken. They'll come in for a bunch of money, all right. You worked for her long?"

"Not so long that I can expect a legacy." The answer came through tightly clamped teeth. "I mentioned Miss Marrender's demise to indicate that the family will regret any unnecessary investigation of this apparent burglary."

"Sure, I get you, big boy . . . though why you rushed in a call about it I don't quite see," he added to himself.

"If you will follow me, officer, I will show you what aroused my suspicions this morning, and you can judge for yourself. I am expecting the attending physician and Mr. William Marrender at any moment. You, of course, will confer with the latter."

"Lord, what a line," muttered Asher and followed him to the door at the foot of the dark staircase.

"Since it is at hand I shall indicate this to you first. You will observe that this door is fastened by a bolt. You see it exactly as I closed it last night. It was Miss Marrender's wish that the door be so fastened every

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night. Her reason I do not know. The room is spoken of as the little gallery, though it appears much like the usual library. Since Miss Marrender's illness the room has not been used, scarcely opened in fact, but I always tested the bolt every night even if it had not been disturbed during the day."

It was a good thing for Asher's reputation that none of the cubs was there to witness his exhibition of inefficiency. He stood dumbly, listening to Cubbage.

"When the charwoman came in this morning, she mentioned the fact that the windows of a side room were standing wide open. I was naturally so perturbed over what had just occurred—Miss Marrender's passing, sir—that I paid little attention to Mrs. Banney's comment. It might have been an hour later—it was then quite light—that I had my first opportunity to investigate what the woman had reported. Observing that this door was still properly bolted, I did not disturb it. Instead I stepped outside and around the house to the windows in question."

"Holy gosh!" Asher murmured. "Of all the nuts—"

"I found the windows quite as Mrs. Banney had described, both open to the limit of their lower sashes. I did nothing but push the hangings back a bit—the wind was twisting them—and look in. The room appeared—not quite in its usual order, sir. Suspecting burglars, I put in the call which you have answered in person. Now, will you examine the open windows and the room from the outside, or do you prefer to enter here?"

"Go ahead and open the door. Is there just the bolt? No lock, huh?"

Cubbage demonstrated his answer. Without a sound

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he drew back the substantial bolt. He turned the knob and the heavy door swung inward.

Thin winter sunshine fell across the little gallery. It came from two windows opposite the door. Their draperies flapped in the chill outer air. The room was "not quite in its usual order." Cubbage had made the statement with unnecessary restraint, for order had become disorder. The drawers in two clumsy old cabinets had either been jerked out altogether or crookedly closed. The pigeon-holes of a tall desk had been untidily examined. The doors of a glassed-in bookcase stood ajar. Some of the books looked as if they had been carelessly replaced and a toppling stack remained on the floor. One corner of the rug was rolled back; chairs were huddled together.

In the midst of this confusion stood the two men. The butler clucked in faint, well-bred distress. The detective was obviously recording a mental image of the disorder.

"Well, what's missing?" Asher demanded.

"I could scarcely say, sir. The marauders must have been searching for something, sir."

"That's a hell of a bright idea, Cubbage. Go ahead and have another one. You help a lot."

In a voice as wooden as his face Cubbage replied, "I was not aware that Miss Marrender kept anything of intrinsic value in this apartment, sir."

"Who beside yourself and the old lady were in the house last night?"

"Miss Marrender's nurse, sir. A young person called Randall, I believe. The doctor can give you further details."

"How about talking to her myself?"

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"She's no longer here, sir. She left before eight this morning. Her story was that the doctor had called her on another case." Cubbage's tone altered ever so slightly, but Asher did not miss the trick.

The deputy-inspector's next question had not reached his lips when a shrill scream—two shrill screams came down the stairway just behind them.

"The voice sounds like Mrs. Banney's." Cubbage was quietly judicial. "And, I dare say, the other is the daughter-in-law. They should be hanging curtains in the drawing-room."

Asher was not interested in theoretical identification. Grasping the butler by the arm he marched out of the rifled apartment. Together they gazed up the steep flight.

"Oh, Mr. Cubbage, do come," wailed Mrs. Banney. "The corp's been murdered."

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Chapter IV

ACCORDING TO CUBBAGE

TIM ASHER reached the top of the stairs first. The two women, white-faced and pop-eyed, moaned incoherently. Thrusting them aside, Asher strode into the room where Eugenia Marrender's body lay. Stark on the wide bed he saw the thin figure, its eyes decently closed. The sheet that had been drawn over the still face had been twitched aside and the bed coverings tossed back far enough to reveal the body to the waist.

Asher bent over, but minute examination was not necessary. A stain spreading from the left breast told its own story. Eugenia Marrender had been shot.

Swiftly Asher looked at the bed clothing. The path of the bullet was plain. For an instant his eyes darted alertly about the room. There was no sign of a weapon. Doors, windows, furniture, nothing escaped Asher's quick preliminary survey. Yet he saw nothing out of keeping with the bed chamber of an elderly invalid.

Then he turned to the group wavering about the doorway. "You said Miss Marrender died this morning. Just how did you mean—died?" The question was directed at Cubbage.

"Miss Marrender's malady was an incurable one, sir. Lately I have heard the nurse and doctor speak of an unfavorable heart condition. This morning very early, about four, the nurse came down and told me that she had just discovered that Miss Marrender was dead. She gave me no particular details. She called the doctor and some time later he called her—about this new case, she

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said. Before she left she told me to leave everything in here just as it was until Dr. Stuart came out. How she herself left the body I do not know, as this is the first I have entered the room since yesterday. Nor had Mrs. Banney and her assistant any occasion to intrude, if I may say as much." Cubbage's glance rebuked the women coldly.

"How about it, you?" Asher thrust a blunt forefinger at Mrs. Banney, upon whose face fright, curiosity, and apology were equally plain.

"Well, mister, it was this way. I never meant to do nothing I shouldn't, but me and Mabel, we thought we'd like a look at the poor old lady, cranky and hard to suit as she was, and anyways I had to come up to the back hall to get the stepladder to put up them drapes like Cubbage said, and so the two of us—never under heaven could you of got me nor Mabel neither to even walk past the door alone—we just stepped inside and tiptoed easy-like over to the bed, but we couldn't see nothing because the sheet was drawed up over her face, and I says all right Mabel you go ahead and do it, and I guess come to think of it we both of us took a hold of it and throwed it and the covers back, and I hope to die if what I seen didn't fairly turn me, and me and Mabel, we got out a whole lot faster'n we went in, and—"

An impatient peal from below dammed Mrs. Banney's monologue.

"That will doubtless be Dr. Stuart, officer," murmured Cubbage, as if asking permission to withdraw from the group long enough to answer the call. The two women and the detective watched the man's stately descent, but none of them could see the significant look

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with which he greeted the young physician nor hear the toneless words, "We are in the hands of the law, doctor."

Without revealing the discovery that had just been made, Asher put the necessary preliminary inquiries, and then demanded a statement about the nurse's report of the patient's death.

Again the incurable ailment and the compensating, more merciful heart weakness were explained. The doctor's terms were deliberately technical, for there was something about Asher's manner that appeared to ruffle him.

"When did you last see your patient, doctor?" asked Asher.

"Yesterday morning, about ten o'clock." Stuart answered the detective directly, but his glance rested for a split second upon Cubbage's blank face.

"What was her condition at that time?"

"She was apparently resting in comfort, though it had already become necessary to prescribe narcotics. However, I detected an unfavorable change in the heart action and I advised against any visitors for a day or so."

"And you heard nothing more until the nurse reported that the patient had died in her sleep?"

"Nothing more."

"Then how do you account for this?" Dramatic gestures were not common with Tim Asher, but there was something theatric in the way his outflung arm commanded the doctor to take a look at the dead woman.

Perry Stuart strode forward across the room but came to an automatic stop the instant his eyes rested upon the bloodstained breast.

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"God!" His voice was sharp with unexpected shock.

"And now if you'll tell me where you sent the nurse, I'll round her in right away. She's the dame that will have to do some explaining." Asher fished elaborately for notebook and pencil as he spoke.

Dr. Stuart pulled a still-folded handkerchief from a pocket, flipped it wide, and nervously mopped his temples. His lips twitched and his voice was husky. "She—she's been murdered, hasn't she?"

"Look at that wound, doctor. Elementary physiology will tell you that the bullet entered a living body." Asher's dry comment gave no sign that he was alertly interested in Stuart's bland dismissal of the question about the nurse's present address. "And you might give me your opinion about how long ago death occurred."

Expertly Dr. Stuart made the usual tests. "From six to nine hours, I should say, but I should prefer to have the coroner establish that."

Asher nodded in friendly agreement. "Yes, I must be calling in about this—and some other items. Now, how about that nurse?"

"Ah, yes," Stuart permitted himself to be reminded. "Her name is Randall—Doris Randall. She's an excellent nurse—I keep her busy. One of my patients convalescing in the South was demanding a more compatible nurse and so when Miss Randall reported Miss Marrender's death, I sent her right on to him. She's on her way by this time, but I'm not at all sure whether she was going by way of Washington or Cincinnati. My patient's name is Stevens and he's down at Paloma. I can't be sure of the exact address, but call my office and the girl there will tell you. But, I say, Inspector—"

Asher knew that the physician knew that he had no

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right to that title, but obligingly he stepped away from the others in response to Stuart's imperious gesture. In a carefully lowered voice the doctor went on. "I realize that you must question Miss Randall, but I must tell you that the girl is just as straight as they make them. She's young and not exactly hardened by experience, but you can believe anything she tells you. What I mean to say is—it would be ghastly for her if there was to be any slimy insinuation—"

"I get you, doctor, but she'll have to tell her story, no matter what it is. Now, you tell me one little thing. Wouldn't she—wouldn't any professional nurse have pulled down the bedclothes and listened for heartbeats, if she had an idea that a patient had passed out? Wouldn't she, huh?"

"If Miss Randall had so done, she would have seen the cause of death and so reported it. I'd take my oath to that, Inspector."

"She didn't—so you say. That means—"

"Two things, Inspector. Either she did not pull down the bed coverings or—"

"Or else she shot the woman herself."

The doctor winced but finished his statement calmly. "— or the wound might not yet have been inflicted."

"Nonsense, that woman was living when the shot was fired."

"Certainly, Inspector, but the nurse might have thought death had occurred before it actually had. After she left the room the murderer might have done his work, though why anyone should trouble to kill an obviously dying woman I do not understand. But that's your problem, Inspector."

"Haven't you forgotten that you have just told me

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that death took place as long as nine hours ago? No, doctor, I'd say it looks bad for the nurse."

Stuart shrugged impatiently and looked at his watch. "I'm operating at the hospital, Inspector. Call me there or at my office if I can be of any further help."

Asher let the doctor go without demur. There was a key on the inside of the bedroom door. He took it out and stepping into the hall he locked the door behind him. "Where's your telephone?" he demanded gruffly of Cubbage. "Stick around, brother. I'm going to talk to you some more after I've put in a couple of calls. You can tell those women to go on about their business."

When Asher had informed Headquarters that there was not only a case of burglary at Windward Hill but also an unexplained death to be investigated, he turned to the hovering Cubbage.

"Snap into it. What have you got to tell me about what was pulled off here last night?"

"Am I to understand that I am already being accused of complicity in these acts of violence, officer?" There was a note of rebuking hauteur in the butler's voice . . . the voice with its incongruously cultured accent.

"Lord, man, don't waste your breath trying to high-hat me. I'm only a hard-boiled cop. Just go ahead and tell me the sad story of your life as it was lived last night. A room downstairs ransacked and an old lady getting her everlasting upstairs—surely you heard a faint echo of something. Come on, spill papa the dope."

"It was a quiet evening, sir. All the evenings are that, since Miss Marrender's illness. I took her dinner tray up at half-past six. At seven the nurse came down for her own meal. It was served in the small dining-room."

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"Who was with the sick woman while the nurse was downstairs?"

"No one, sir. Constant attendance had not yet been necessary. By eight Miss Randall was back on duty, and Mrs. Banney had left for the night. I gave the furnace its usual inspection and then read quietly in my room until ten o'clock, when I again made the rounds and closed the house for the night. My room is off the lower hall, you see, and I have no difficulty hearing telephone or doorbells."

"Any such calls last night?"

"No, sir, none." Asher noticed that Cubbage paused before replying.

"All right. You put yourself to bed? Then what? Did the nurse stay up all night with her patient?"

"No, she did not even sleep on a couch in the same room, though there had been some plan about that, I believe. In fact, I had been told to get down a cot from the attic storeroom. Miss Randall slept just across the hall. No doubt you would like to inspect the room for yourself under the circumstances."

Asher tucked this palpable hint away for later consideration and again suggested that Cubbage stick to the topic assigned him.

"I can't say that I heard any particular noise during the night, sir. It was a very stormy night and we get the full force of the west winds here at Windward Hill. I confess that I was somewhat disturbed—an old house like this creaks and rattles very annoyingly. I was awake from time to time during the night, not at all unusual with me, sir, but I heard nothing that the wind could not have accounted for. At one such time I arose and went down to the furnace. The fire never holds well

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when the wind comes from the west. I had just returned when I was informed by the nurse of Miss Marrender's death. I then made coffee and—well, after that event the night seemed over at Windward Hill."

"Surely you couldn't have thought a pistol shot sounded like the wind howling. Let me have it straight. When did you hear the gun?"

"Let me assure you, officer. I heard nothing that even remotely suggested the discharge of a revolver. However, I rather doubt that even on a still and windless night I could hear a sound of that sort while in the furnace room."

"Hear any sound from the room that was entered?"

Cubbage shook his head in grave disclaimer. Nothing more was said for a minute or two as Mrs. Banney and Mabel trailed by, bearing mops and dusters, bound for the long drawing-room. Then Cubbage gave a sharp cough of determination.

"Perhaps I should have mentioned this before. . . . It was quite against both the doctor's and nurse's orders, but I was overridden. While Miss Randall was dining last evening, one of the relatives called and in spite of my instructions went up to see Miss Marrender."

Cubbage's precise voice dropped as if he had said all there was to say. Asher snorted with impatience. "Just as a matter of record, who was it?" he snapped.

"A lady whom I had never seen before. All she said was, 'I must see my aunt at once.' She started immediately up the stairs and then she said, over her shoulder, 'I'll let myself out. Don't wait.' Later when I went out for Miss Randall's dessert, I thought for a moment I had heard the front door close and assumed that the

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caller had gone, but I could not swear to that. I did not see her go.

"Hm-m, just another reason why a little talk with the nurse would come in right," Asher said dryly, and was about to ask for a description of the caller when a startled look in Cubbage's eyes made him swing on his heel.

A man had entered the front door unheard. He had advanced along the gloomy hall as far as the door of the little gallery, still standing wide open. Asher recognized the man at once. It was William Marrender.

Marrender was taller from the waist down than he appeared when seated, or perhaps it was his thick graceless shoulders that accentuated his long legs so awkwardly. His lustreless brown eyes were inclined to squint, and there were lines on his heavy face indicating that being a senior executive before he was forty had produced attendant nerve strain. As he advanced toward middle age those who knew frequently remarked on the increasing resemblance he bore in figure to his grandfather, Robert Rufus Marrender, a pioneer industrialist whose money had already been freely spent by his descendants.

Marrender's resonant voice boomed into sudden comment. "I see Gene lost no time. The damned bounder!" He turned away from the wrecked room as if in disgust, in which Asher could detect no trace of surprise or curiosity, and then Cubbage stepped forward to tell the eldest Marrender nephew how death had come to Windward Hill.

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Chapter V

AN ALLY FOR ASHER

IT was mid-afternoon before Tim Asher got back to Headquarters. Lord, this was a tough break . . . the Inspector called out of town to testify in the Haxon trial and the Chief announcing that it was up to him—Asher—to get the goods on somebody in this Windward Hill mess.

Asher slumped wearily into the Inspector's own chair before he was aware that there was a man behind the spreadout newspaper in the window recess that looked down upon Market Square. His grunt of welcome was not as inhospitable as it sounded, for the young man who emerged from the huskings of the afternoon editions was one for whom the more experienced men in the department had a secret and growing respect.

"Hello, Stowe. Who let you in? Smelled trouble, I'll bet."

"A call from your boss just before he left town this noon, Timmy. He sort of hinted that you ought to let yourself talk to me."

"About what, huh?"

"He didn't say, but I hope . . . whatever it was broke out at Windward Hill."

"So Peyton told you to drop around." Asher relapsed again into silence, but this time he was conscious of a secret relief. If the responsibility of handling the

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Marrender case was to be turned over to him in Inspector Peyton's enforced absence, the Inspector had left him an ally. By jiminy, he'd use the youngster. . . .

"Here's the dope, Stowe." Briefly Asher gave the lazily attentive young man a report of the summons to Windward Hill to investigate an apparent burglary, and the discovery that Miss Eugenia Marrender had not died naturally.

"Now here's my first idea—I don't mind trying it out on you. The nurse has beat it already, and the butler—oh boy, that butler! My bet is that bird and the nurse cooked up this thing together. They had the place to themselves last night and could have staged most anything. And yet, Cubbage acts like he was going to squeal on the nurse. He certainly is throwing dirt on her every chance he gets. Then there's something phony about the room that was entered and searched—that looks like it was entered and searched. Cubbage gave me a dirty look when I picked up two or three burnt matches off the floor. There wasn't a trace of anything interesting on the ground underneath the open windows. The ground's bare and frozen and has been for the last two weeks."

"How did Marrender explain his reference to Gene?"

"You mean when he lamped the wrecked room? He didn't want to, Stowe, but at last I got him to say that Eugene Tracy, a cousin who lives at Windward Hill when he's in town, had been seen yesterday morning coming away from the station, and that their aunt had always said that Gene could have anything he wanted from the little gallery. And then Cubbage produced a message that he had received from Tracy. It stated that

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he expected to return to Windward Hill Wednesday night—that's tonight."

"Where did the message come from?"

"New York. Grand Central post mark. Just a common one-cent government post card, addressed to Cubbage and signed E. T. Both Cubbage and Marrender identified the writing as Gene Tracy's. It was dated Monday and came in the morning mail."

"Did Marrender see Tracy yesterday?"

"No, it was some girl in his office. We can check up on her all right. But, say, if Tracy did tear up the room, I'll bet whatever made him do it will turn out to have nothing to do with croaking the old lady. And if Tracy didn't do it, then the butler and the nurse are in it up to their necks."

"Why theorize so soon, Timmy?" There was nothing condescending in Dick Stowe's quiet question, but Asher bristled hotly.

"Theorizing, am I? Listen to this: I took a look around the nurse's room—Cubbage was awfully afraid I wasn't going to—and here's what I found."

He tossed across to Stowe a small box which held loads for a .38 revolver. Stowe opened it carefully.

"That's all right," said Asher. "It's already been gone over for prints. Just one of 'em missing, see? What'll you bet the autopsy will show a .38 bullet?"

"Rather like a woman, I suppose, to put only a single charge in her weapon . . . or is it?" Stowe was so apparently talking to himself that Astor made no answering comment. He had one more broadside for a climax.

"That's all I found in the nurse's room, but when I came out I noticed that the last door on the same side

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of the hall was standing partly open. Now, Stowe, I can't be sure, but for the life of me I can't remember seeing that door open when I first came up. Anyway, I said to Cubbage, who'd stuck right at my heels all along, 'What room's that?" and he says 'It's Tracy's.' I stepped inside. It was dark and cold as a barn—plainly hadn't been in use for some time. I pulled up the curtains and then I could see that while everything else in the room was as neat as wax one drawer in a chiffonier was jerked partly open—a lower drawer. In one corner there was folded a dressing gown of some soft flannel stuff and on it I could see the impression of a heavy object that had been lying there—an object the size and shape, say, of a .38."

"Whew! That's hot stuff, Timmy. What are you going to do about it?" Stowe stretched his long legs, and thrust his hands deep into his coat pockets after deciding that he did not want another of Asher's smokes.

"I got pictures of the impression, of course, and I'm going to watch how long it takes it to fade out and maybe I can get some idea how long the gun had been lying there."

"Good man, Timmy. But the nurse—"

"Sure, we're after her this minute. She's headed for Paloma, and if we don't catch her at Atlanta we'll get her down there. The reports from the post-mortem and from Radge about finger prints will likely be ready before I call it a day. . . ." Asher shifted his position and the Inspector's chair squawked in protest.

"I suppose till we hear from Radge and the p.m. we ought to go a little easy, huh?" There was an edge of diffidence in Asher's words. "Marrender tried to lay down the law about what could and could not be done

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about interfering with the sacred grief of the bereft family, but you know how much ice that cracks in our racket. Though the Marrenders aren't Tom, Dick, and Harry—"

"Which also cracks a little ice, as even yours truly has observed from time to time," drawled Stowe.

"We'll be watching tonight to see whether Tracy comes back, if we don't run him down anywhere in the meantime. And Downer's out at the house now keeping an eye on the butler. There's something damn fishy about that guy, Dick. When I finally pinned him down to a description of the woman who ran upstairs last night, it was the world's worst—just a bunch of words. I could arrest him right now as a material witness—"

"Just what did he witness, Timmy?"

Asher overlooked this, patiently. "I talked to the woman who comes in every day to work, a plain old hen named Banney. She says she saw the doctor's car standing in the drive yesterday afternoon and heard a woman talking in the sick room—a woman whose voice reminded her of one of the nieces, a Mrs. Harris Latimer. It was during the nurse's time off. That's got to be checked up because Dr. Stuart said he hadn't been in since yesterday morning. I couldn't get much out of the Banney woman on the subject of Cubbage, but I'm not done yet."

Stowe nodded approvingly. "The nurse, the butler, and the wandering nephew are all good leads, Tim, but I'd say that all the relatives ought to be looked up. Eugenia Marrender was rich—scads of money, from the space she's getting in the papers. She had been stricken with a deadly disease, and yet someone could not wait for her to die. Someone wanted something that only her

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death could procure. Her will must be looked up . . . and then we may know which way to jump."

"I know what the boss meant—sending you around, and I don't mind telling you that I'll be mighty glad to turn that end of it over to you, especially the relatives." Asher tried to be offhand.

"Consider it signed on the dotted line. I'm glad to be kept out of mischief just now. My wife had to go out to the Coast to see her mother through an operation, and we had cleaned up every job we had before she left."

This was as direct a reference as Tim Asher had ever heard from Stowe himself about the partnership that existed between Richard and Laura Stowe. "Private Investigations" their professional cards read and they must have meant the word "private," for their names were never featured in connection with the sensational cases that from time to time titillated the Middle West. Yet Asher knew that Inspector Peyton's brilliant work in the affair of Burr Sanderson had been founded entirely upon the activity of the young Stowes. There was more than a rumor about the Templeby sapphires, too, and an apocryphal legend concerning the solution of the McVey murder. . . .

Thinking of all this, Asher played safe enough to add, "At that, don't hesitate to horn in anywhere you want. I mean, when you talk to the Marrenders, if you get hold of anything else—"

"Sure thing, Timmy. It's a fifty-fifty job." Dick Stowe rose and gave himself a mighty stretch. "I crave to chat with Mr. William Marrender right now. Where do you suppose I can wing him?"

"Try his house on the Levee Drive first. If he's not there, he's probably gone back to Windward Hill."

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At the door Stowe turned. "I say, Tim, there's one part of your yarn you haven't finished. Just what was stolen from that messed up room?"

Asher looked heavily mysterious as one who wished to imply that the crux of a problem had at last been pointed out. "Boy, nobody'll say. They either act like they don't believe anything's gone, or else like they had never paid enough attention to the junk that was in the little gallery to be sure what was or wasn't missing, but I'm telling you,"—Asher's light voice rose to a new high of earnestness—"the family would just as soon soft-pedal the wrecked room."

Dick Stowe opened the door, and then turned and grinned at Asher before he stepped out. "Ah, Timmy, don't get my hopes up like that. You make the case sound like a magazine serial."

Instead of making his way directly to the correct establishment on the Levee Drive where the William Rufus Marrenders lived, Stowe presented himself at the United Utilities Building and consulted "Information" about his desire to see the third vice-president.

"Information," crisply efficient and hostess-like, hoped that the caller had an appointment and suggested that Miss Wilcox, Mr. Marrender's secretary, might arrange one. Stowe was subsequently permitted to enter the outer room of the third vice-president's suite, where he was again stopped by an even more smoothly efficient young woman.

"Mr. Marrender is not in. He will not be in for several days. There has been a death in the family. . . ."

"I see. . . . Well, that's my bad luck, too, unless—" To the secretary, the diffident young salesman who confronted her was experiencing the dawn of an idea.

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"Is there any way in which I can help you?" she asked mechanically. The younger they were the more necessary they thought it that they should speak directly to Big Business itself.

"It was really a kind of personal matter—not United Utilities business, I mean. Not life insurance or a new car, either. . . ." Dick stammered delightfully, and Janet Wilcox hoped she looked fresher than she felt. "I'll tell you what, if you could tell me the name of Marrender's family lawyer, it would help a lot," he blurted out in convincing youthful embarrassment.

"I can do that, surely." The girl's smile was genuine now. "Bartholomew Dexter and Son is the firm in charge of all of Mr. Marrender's private affairs. He often mentions that it is a family habit, that the first Dexter was his grandfather's lawyer."

Stowe thanked the secretary and began to back out. "You've been so kind—maybe you could tell me something else. There's another member of the family that I want to see, too, a man named Tracy." Dick consulted a notebook with ostentation. "Eugene Tracy's the name. Maybe you know where I could find him at this time of day."

A cold, non-committal mask immediately slipped down over the secretary's friendly eyes and her smile turned professional again. "I do not know, sorry . . . in fact, I do not recall the name."

"Now what the hell should she lie about that for?" Dick asked himself as the descending elevator obeyed his signal. "She may not have been the one who told Marrender about seeing Tracy, but she knows the lad and knows him well, or I'm not clicking today."

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CHAPTER VI

THE MARRENDER HEIRS

STOWE'S next stop was at the old-fashioned offices occupied by Bartholomew Dexter and Son in an outmoded business block. Mr. Dexter was in, but just on the point of leaving for the day. Could the gentleman not call in the morning—at ten, inquired a pale, serious youth who doubtless attended law classes at the Y. M. C. A at night. The gentleman could not, and when he had further announced that his business concerned the police the clerk produced his superior. His excitement indicated that criminal law was not featured in the offices of Bartholomew Dexter and Son.

The lawyer was a small, cushiony man, and Dick promptly bet himself that he was the "Son" of the firm name. He introduced himself as a special agent sent out from Inspector Peyton's office. "Your probable surmise is quite correct," he went on. "I am investigating the matter of the death of Miss Eugenia Marrender, and I have come to you because you may have been in charge of her affairs."

The lawyer nodded his bald head in rapid assent. "Yes, yes, but, my dear young sir, it must be immediately understood that publicity in the matter must be held to the irreducible minimum. The Marrenders, you know, the Marrenders—in short, the Marrenders are not to be gossipped about publicly."

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"But you, as a lawyer, know that the circumstances of her death cannot be left uninvestigated."

"Yes, yes, quite so," twittered Dexter. "In fact, I said as much to William this noon. Police inspection there would have to be—no power under heaven could avert it, but the publicity of the unprincipled press we could and would divert. He quite caught my idea."

So William Marrender had entertained the notion that a murder in the family need not go through the hands of the police, thought Dick. Maybe the man had his own reasons for being nervous. . . . Blandly he assured the lawyer. "That is exactly how I hope to serve your clients now. Not every activity of the local department is carried on by the men in uniform, nor by the police reporters either. Just now I'm after information about Miss Marrender's will. To whom is her money to go? Under the circumstances, I believe my question is an ethical one."

Dexter blinked his eyes and twirled a heavy dark cameo ring which he wore upon his left hand. He was no fool; he knew well enough what the Marrenders were about to be plunged into. Yet he might have hedged had he not carelessly allowed his eye to wander to the dispatch case, ready for his announced departure. The annoyed jerk he gave his glance away from the case completed his betrayal.

"If I may suggest," said Dick politely, "you have a copy of the document at hand. Perhaps you were about to check its terms before reading it to the family. All I need is a bare statement of provisions and beneficiaries."

Bartholomew Dexter capitulated. After all, this suave young man was much to be preferred to a cal-

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lous reporter or a peremptory summons to Headquarters. He rumbled into speech. "As a matter of fact, I had just been looking over the instrument. I believe I can satisfy you without reading it verbatim. The will was executed some six months ago just after the physicians had become certain about Miss Marrender's physical condition. It set aside a will made a number of years ago, following the death of her father, Robert Rufus Marrender, my father's friend and client."

Thus was Dick assured that he had won his wager.

Dexter went rapidly on, as if desiring to have done with a distasteful necessity. "In brief, Miss Marrender distributed the bulk of her estate among four of her nieces and nephews, a sum approximating two hundred thousand to each. The remainder, amounting to almost another two hundred thousand, goes to various charities."

"The names of the legatees?" Dick's hint was gentle.

"William Marrender, his sister Sara, Mrs. Harris Latimer, and Miss Francesca Penrose. The two last named are sisters."

"Eugene Tracy is a nephew also, isn't he? Isn't he named?"

"No." Dexter's answer wanted to be final, but duty or something equally unpleasant committed him to further explanation. "Miss Marrender informed me at the time that she and her nephew had an agreement about his omission from her will, and that in event of her death a document would come to light that would make the matter perfectly clear. However, she took me no further into her confidence."

Dick purred at this bit of information, but he did not allow his gravity to be outmatched by Dexter's.

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"Were these bequests conditioned in any way?" he asked.

The lawyer shook his head. "Not at all, and as far as I am aware, her affairs are in excellent condition. There will be no delay about probate. I might add, also, that William Marrender is named as executor." He cleared his throat abruptly. "And now, may I ask, what use do you expect to make of this information?"

The change in Bartholomew Dexter was amazing. His fussiness and air of decayed ineptitude were for the moment sloughed off and Dick Stowe caught a glimpse of the old war-eagle that his reputation echoed of.

"No use at all unless it helps to betray the murderer of your client. Why should anyone have desired the death of that helpless, dying old woman? I beg of you, if you know anything that might point to a motive, be frank with me, sir. Surely none of these four who inherit so generously—"

Dexter waved Stowe to silence. "Unbelievable, young man, unbelievable. They are persons of established position, living in comfort. They could gain nothing by forcing the time of their inheritance."

"True, of course." As one who was but mentally reminding himself, Stowe murmured the names just mentioned. "William Marrender has been remarkably successful with United Utilities, hasn't he? Mrs. Latimer is one of the younger social leaders, I believe, and her sister—why, I have it now! I knew there was something familiar about that name. Francesca Penrose is the actress that the Theater League discovered so overwhelmingly last season. Sara Marrender—Marrender's sister, did you say? Possibly a girl so young as not yet to have achieved a personality for herself."

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"It's plain you don't know Sally," and Dexter laughed so humanly that Stowe looked at him in some curiosity. The old boy liked Sally, he concluded. There was something positively grandfatherly about his "She's a mere child, of course, but quite her own captain."

"I have just one more favor to ask, sir, at least for this time." Again Dick's famous smile was soothing. "I should like your word that you will say nothing to the people whose names we have mentioned. I must work in my own way, you understand, but I hope to convince you that I can work with finesse and discretion."

The cameo ring was twirled violently, but the promise was given, and Dick Stowe bowed himself out in his most finished style.

Down on the street at the first news stand he purchased a theatrical weekly and verified an association he had been conscious of ever since he had identified Francesca Penrose as *the* Francesca Penrose of the much discussed Theatre League play now on tour. Just as he thought . . . that play had been in Cincinnati for a week. Consequently Dick dispatched a detailed message to a fellow operative in that city. Then he set out for the Lindenwood address of the Harris Latimers, wondering if the unknown relative whom Cubbage had not recognized might prove to be Francesca Penrose.

A car was waiting in the drive as he approached the house. It was a smart, dark blue coupé, and when Dick observed medical insignia on the wind shield he made an automatic note of the license number of the car. A maid, crisp in black and white, admitted him and bore off his card, upon which he scribbled a few words. Nor did he fail to note that the maid had read this notation before she vanished from his sight.

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The maid reappeared shortly and showed him into a small, rather formal drawing-room. "Mrs. Latimer will be in soon," she parroted. Removing the lid from an extremely decorative inlaid box, she revealed an assortment of cigarettes and then withdrew. Again Dick was aware that the black and white maid was interested either in him or in the purpose of his call.

There was nothing that he could do but wait. The house, a charming place, was silent. The curtained doorway that led to the hall was no barrier and from it Dick deliberately reconnoitered. Still there was no sound of interest. Then quite without warning a door swung open a little further down the hall. He could see nothing more than that, but he heard:

"— to worry about, darling. You're a precious little fool."

This was followed by what sounded like a faint rush, and then the unmistakable little rustles and murmurs that accompany a certain stage of love making. About that Dick Stowe considered himself quite competent to judge. . . . The only other words he could distinguish were spoken in a light, quick feminine voice. "But I can't imagine where I left my gloves. It's worrying me. . . ."

When, shortly after, masculine steps issued from the opened door, Dick was no longer at his post of vantage; he was at a better one. From one of the long windows of the little drawing-room he had an excellent view of the waiting coupé and of the man who stepped briskly into it. Dick stood looking after the departing car in fond contemplation of a little new idea. Then a high, sweet voice greeted him and he turned to meet Mrs. Harris Latimer.

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The woman to whom he addressed his skilful apologies was, if she had just participated in a passionate farewell, at this moment completely mistress of herself. As she listened assured in manner, she gave the impression of one whose regret at the death of a respected elderly relative was as conventionally proper as the occasion demanded. Katherine Latimer was a decorative, silvery blonde; Stowe thought her beautiful. He explained himself briefly and she listened with grave attention.

"My first question, Mrs. Latimer, is a very simple one. When did you last see your aunt?"

She sighed softly before she spoke. "We were not particularly attentive to Aunt Eugenia. Indeed, she had made it rather plain that we annoyed her, bored her, what you will. She was an eccentric. You must not forget that, Mr. Stowe. But as for your question, I was driving by Windward Hill yesterday and ran in to inquire. She seemed just about as usual to me—had little to say. But then, she was never given to small talk."

"Were you driving alone? In your own car?" asked Dick, mindful of what Mrs. Banney had said.

"Yes—that is, no. How stupid of me. I was driving with Dr. Stuart. I am under his care—my wretched nerves. He thinks fresh air will help to steady me."

Katherine Latimer's serene poise had vanished. Her face sharpened tensely as she contradicted herself and she bit her lips in exasperation.

The young man who observed her went on with his business smoothly. "My second question is one that I do hope you can answer. The household at Windward

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Hill is so limited. . . . What can you tell me about the man Cubbage?"

"Aunt Eugenia's butler? I'm afraid I can't qualify to give him a reference, if that's what you mean."

"That's not what I mean—unless you mean that you have some definite reason that would prevent your recommending him." Dick was as conscious as his hostess was that they were playing for position.

"His manner of opening a door is abominable, and I don't like the way he waxes floors, but aside from that— At any rate, he must have pleased Aunt Eugenia if for no other virtue than his economy with coal."

"How long has he been with your aunt? Where did she get him? Were his references looked up?"

"With such a generous list of queries to choose from I ought to be able to tell you something—but I'm afraid I can't. A year ago, when I left for France, the man was not in my aunt's employ; when I returned early in October he was—that's all I know. I never discussed him with Aunt Eugenia." She paused a moment and chose a cigarette. Her poise had returned tenfold. "Your questions call for facts which unfortunately I do not possess, but may I share a suspicion with you? I have seen this servant of my aunt's only three or four times since my return last fall, and I must admit that on those occasions I gave him the most casual sort of regard. But I have seen him other places—I'm sure it was he! Or else he has a most remarkable double." Again she paused.

Stowe was patient.

"Early in December I was a guest at a rather intimate little supper party that was given in honor of Fells Lothrop—the English poet, you know. It was one

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of those arty affairs where no one is introduced, but one of the guests was my aunt's butler—or else his son!"

Dick Stowe rather wished that Asher had not assigned him so definitely to the Marrender relatives. His immediate attention might better have gone to Cubbage. What Mrs. Latimer was saying made that only too clear. "Why do you qualify your identification?" he asked.

"Because the man at the party was certainly much younger than Cubbage. Otherwise the resemblance was perfect."

"You saw him again?"

"Yes, not more than a month ago. A group of us were slumming—this town has so little to offer in the way of night life. We had gone to a dinky little café out on the West End. The food was good, but aside from that we were pretty much let down. At a table next the wall I was certain that I saw Cubbage. The lights were dim, so I can't be sure that he looked his age, but it was his voice that attracted my attention this time. I heard him speak in that perfectly intoned accent of his. It's not one commonly heard from a servant in the Middle West, you know."

"I'd like to make a note of those two dates, Mrs. Latimer, if you can tell me exactly."

"Not offhand, I'm afraid, though I'm sure I can figure it out from my engagement book. I shall be glad to let you know later, if that will be of any help."

"Quite. And now for a third item. I understand that your cousin, Eugene Tracy, makes his home at Windward Hill. Can you tell me where he could be found now?"

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Katherine Latimer's eyes, green with the lustre of old turquoise, narrowed swiftly. "Oh, no one ever knows where Gene is or what he's doing. He's the nonconformist of the clan. Whenever he's in funds, he's off; when he hasn't a cent, back he comes to Windward Hill. Frankly, I never understood his status with Aunt Eugenia. I suppose she tolerated him because he was by way of being her namesake, yet I've often felt that she was afraid of Gene. There was a poisonous hatred between them—don't ask me why. I don't know."

Stowe started to speak, but Katherine Latimer interrupted with a quick appealing gesture. "Please—I shouldn't have said that. You'll think I have no sense of family loyalty. My beastly nerves. . . ."

Stowe's friendly smile was as disarming as he meant it to be. "There's just one other matter I'd like to ask you about. What was there at Windward Hill that would attract thieves?"

"At last you have asked me a question that I can answer definitely." The voice that answered him was again even and cool. "There is nothing of value at Windward Hill. Aunt Eugenia lived very simply indeed for a woman of her wealth. The house is shabbily furnished. I'm sure it hasn't been redecorated for twenty-five years. There are a few fine Early American pieces, but the linen, silver, china, and so on are quite commonplace. She never cared for jewels; she sold the only valuable piece she owned a few years ago—a gorgeous emerald. I don't mind saying it should have been given to one of her nieces. But she would have kept things like that down at the bank along with her papers and securities. My cousin William Marrender insisted on that several years ago." She smiled brightly. "I have no

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theory to account for the little gallery being entered last night. That's what you're getting at, isn't it?"

Dick tossed a half-smoked cigarette into the fire and rose to go. "All this, my dear Mrs. Latimer, is really a futile sort of busy work until the nurse is brought back. Her story will, no doubt, make short work of the apparent mystery."

"The nurse? Oh, yes. . . . But—her motive?"

"Oh, I dare say she and the butler have some sort of racket." Dick spoke indifferently, but his eyes were alert.

Just as he was withdrawing from the room, the maid who had admitted him announced Marrender.

Mrs. Latimer murmured explanations, rather unnecessarily. "My cousin and I must assume the responsibility of arrangements—out at Windward Hill, you understand."

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CHAPTER VII

RETURN OF GENE TRACY

APPARENTLY Dick Stowe had paid little attention to Katherine Latimer's announcement that she and her cousin were going out to the bleak house on Windward Hill, for from the Latimer establishment he went directly to the Marrender address on the Levee Drive. He asked, however, for Miss Sara Marrender. The servant who opened the door informed him, stiffly, that Miss Marrender did not reside there.

"Where can I find her?" Stowe's watch was shot into view, as if to indicate that time meant money.

"I can't say, sir, where she might be at the present, but I presume that her business address remains the same."

That did not enlighten Stowe. The servant rather grudgingly emitted an address and then added as though, after all, it was not his shame, "It's a store called after her—Sally's Shop, or something like that."

Sally's Shop! Dick whooped silently. Sally's Shop, of all the priceless luck. Off he went. He did not have to be told how to find Sally's Shop. But wasn't he the social innocent not to know that Sally of the Shop was Sara Marrender in person?

On his way to the not quite aristocratic address of what the Stowes called an old-fashioned general store gone modernistic, Dick made hasty arrangements with

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himself to be perfectly frank with this scion of the Marrenders. He remembered how astutely she had sold them a chest the Stowe *ménage* had not exactly needed. . . .

It was late when he reached the Shop. Sally's assistants, both old enough to be her mother should she ever need two, demurred singly and in duo when the importunate young man demanded to see Miss Marrender. Unless, compromised the pudgy one, he was the man about the hanging oil lamps that were to be shipped up from Brown County. Obligingly, Dick was. . . .

When he opened the closed door at the back of the two square old rooms that once had been front and back parlors in the simple seventies, he found Sally unpacking a barrel of old dishes. Before she could sink from her knees to a more comfortable position on the floor, the wily young investigator plunged into his business.

"Maybe you recognize me, Miss Marrender. I hope you do. My wife and I about furnished our whole apartment from your last rummage sale. What you don't know, I suspect, is that I am a detective—not a divorce snooper. Lately I've been working almost altogether with the local authorities, though officially I am not of the police. At the present moment I am investigating the murder of your aunt—"

"The murder of—my aunt! Aunt Genie! How gracefully you break news."

The words were flippant, but Dick Stowe could have no doubt that Sara Marrender had not before known that her aunt had not died a natural death. The bright hazel eyes with their straight dark brows looked

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squarely into his. He watched the flicker of caution in their depths.

"I had a message early this morning that she had died, but I've had to be out of town nearly all day. And then these shipments came in that I had to check over at once. That old crook down in Georgetown thinks I don't know my marbles. . . . I'm closing the shop of course till after the funeral. But murder— Just what do you mean?"

When Stowe had given the gravely attentive girl a succinct account of what had transpired at Windward Hill, her only comment was: "Why have you come here to tell me this?"

"Because I must have the cooperation of every member of Miss Marrender's family if I am to be so fortunate as to solve the mystery of her death without involving the Marrenders in a lot of screaming publicity."

"That wouldn't be so bad for the shop, so you can't chill my blood like that. . . . Oh, I mustn't talk in that beastly way. Aunt Genie wasn't exactly popular with us, but I needn't stick that juicy bit down the public throat. You must believe me, Mr. Stowe, I want to be of assistance to you. I'd say, from what you have just told me, that it was the nurse and the doctor that did the dirty work."

"The doctor? That's an interesting idea. How did you get it?"

"Just plain cattishness, I'll have to confess. I don't like Perry Stuart much, that's all."

There was something suspiciously discreet about the frank expression. It led Dick promptly to his next question. "Does Mrs. Latimer share that feeling with you?"

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"Kaye? So you've heard that dirt too."

Dick plunged boldly ahead. "I've heard that there's a divorce in the offing."

"No, you haven't heard that. Kaye couldn't bring action against Harris Latimer in a thousand years, and if she should let her foot slip so that he could sue her, she'd not get alimony, and without money Stuart would be a fool to try to handle Kaye."

"Thank you for so clearly pointing out the doctor's motive."

Sally cast him a wry smile. "I advise you to think that over again. In my own simple way I can see a crack in your premise."

"When did you last see your aunt?" Thus Dick waived her challenge.

"Strangely enough, yesterday morning. I hadn't been out to Windward Hill since the Sunday before Christmas. I was out trailing a corner cupboard on the Brookboro road and on my way back I ran in to see Aunt Genie. She acted like an old she-devil, too, and I don't mind saying it." Sally's eyes blazed with sudden anger.

"If she said or did anything that might throw any light on what was to happen to her, I hope you won't mind saying that also."

"Not at all." There was a curious dryness about the girl's reply. "When I came in the nurse asked me to stay with Aunt Genie for a few minutes, so there I was, planted. She started to quiz me right away about my business here—she's never approved of it, and the first thing you know we were quarrelling. Bill's attitude toward me may be positively medieval, but he's a grand

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brother, and I couldn't let her say what she did about him."

"What did she say?"

"Why—er—that as a guardian for little sister he wasn't so hot and a lot of tripe like that."

Sally's floundering reply was not convincing but of that Dick Stowe gave no outward sign. Instead he asked, "How did the nurse impress you?"

"Just as a good-looking girl who knew her business. I saw her only for a few minutes when I first came in. I got so mad at Aunt Genie that I walked out without waiting for the nurse to come back."

"What can you tell me about the butler?"

"Nothing at all. I didn't get even a good look at him—the hall at Windward Hill is a murky hole."

"What do you know about your cousin Eugene's status with your aunt?"

"I like Gene! He's my favorite relative, usually. He has never fit in with the Marrender traditions—not that I hold that against him. Anything but! I wish Gene had been at home when all this happened, for he's awfully keen. Really, I can offer no better suggestion than that you talk this whole mess over with Gene. He'll be back, of course, the minute he hears. He's been in New York. I had a note from him last week. He went to peddle his new score. He expects to revolutionize musical comedy some day."

"You haven't answered my question. How did he rate with your aunt?"

"Relentless, aren't you? All I know is that they let one another politely alone for the most part. She had no patience with his musical ambitions. Why, she

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wouldn't even let him have a piano in his own room. . . ."

"Your brother remarked that it was understood that Eugene was to have anything he wanted from the little gallery. What do you know about that arrangement?"

"Bill said that? He's been little-girling me again. That's something that has been kept from baby sister—I never heard of it before. I say, are you trying to frame Gene? That's my inspiration for today."

"Try to have another one—do! Anyone who runs a shop like this ought to be an authority on what there was of value in your aunt's house that would explain the ransacked room."

Sally Marrender rose to her feet and dusted her hands deliberately. "All right, listen to the expert then: if every stick of stuff in that house was being auctioned, I wouldn't even read the handbills. Windward Hill is perfect 1880 throughout, and we've a long way to go before marble tops and scroll-saw trims bust into fashion. But—papers are valuable sometimes, you know. What do you bet it was something of that sort that the thief was after?"

Gravely Dick allowed Sally Marrender to believe that she had presented him with a brand new idea. He thanked her gratefully and left the shop. After a thoughtful dinner at George and Al's he climbed the drafty wooden stairs that led to the Inspector's office. Asher had left, but there was information waiting for him.

First, the autopsy had revealed a .38 bullet. The viscera showed traces of morphine, but in quantities that agreed perfectly with the opiate being administered under medical direction. The medical examiner's con-

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sidered opinion on the approximate time that death had occurred was in keeping with Dr. Stuart's earlier estimate—not earlier than midnight nor later than three o'clock.

Second, Lieutenant Radge, in charge of Bertillon files and finger print records, reported that the photographs and other tests made of the window and door frames in the little gallery, the box of ammunition found in the nurse's room, and the edge of the open drawer in Tracy's room showed no distinct finger prints, only blurred smudges such as would have been left by gloved hands. At this, Dick was reminded that a nurse would undoubtedly have been supplied with rubber gloves, that a butler with a fastidious accent might not always have worked barehanded, and that anyone coming in from outside on a winter night would naturally have been gloved. On the medicine bottle, however, very clear prints had been revealed. They corresponded with quantities found in the nurse's room.

Third, so far Headquarters had not caught up with the Randall girl, but the police at Paloma were waiting for her the minute she stepped off a train. If she is really guilty, thought Dick, she will have gone off in another direction. The best proof in the world that she isn't mixed up in what happened here is for her to appear in Paloma. She'll have negligence to explain—criminal negligence maybe—but not complicity in the death of Eugenia Marrender.

Fourth, Asher had gone out to Windward Hill and Stowe was to meet him there before the evening was over.

An obliging underling just going off duty gave Stowe a lift as far as the last quarter of a mile that led to

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Windward Hill. The house stood on a gaunt bluff that overlooked the lower reaches of the river that looped its way through the city. The spectral grey-white sycamores that lined the climbing drive creaked in the winter wind, and the three twisted pines that shielded the house from the full force of the blasts threw black shadows across its face. Stowe had almost reached the narrow portico that marked the main entrance before he could detect glimmers of light from any window. The upper rooms were in darkness; the curtains below carefully drawn.

A familiar signal stopped him. It was Tim Asher. "That you, Dick? Good boy! The family's inside—some of 'em, and the lawyer. I had to tell that old bird where to get off. They had the idea that if they said so we'd just drop the whole business. They still think they're going to step on the newspapers. But, listen, they've kindly consented to let us investigate discreetly. That means you're elected—no kiddin'. There's nothing discreet about me, and as I'm the temporary boss I'm wishing it off on you. And Heaven help you, Dick, if you let me down!"

"Tim, you call me a White Hope at your own risk. What are you up to now?"

"I'm browsing around on the chance of catching Tracy. If he should come in tonight from New York, it will be the 8:52. One of the boys that knows him by sight is down there to tail him, but it's my bet that he's going to drop some other way."

"Who's inside?"

"Relatives. They're talking funeral arrangements now—that's why I thought it was safe to blow for a

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