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A Black Band MYSTERY

MURDER IN A WALLED TOWN

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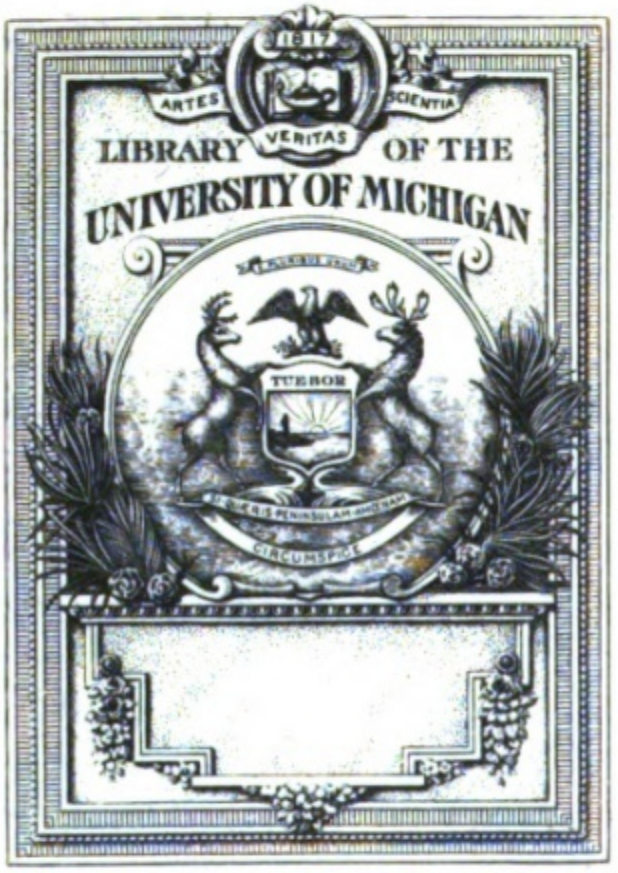

BEQUEST OF
ORMA FITCH BUTLER, PH.D., '07
PROFESSOR OF LATIN

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A Black Band MYSTERY

MURDER IN A WALLED TOWN

The Private Memoirs of Wayne Armitage

By KATHERINE WOODS

Boston and New York
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
The Riverside Press Cambridge
1934

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TO

EDITH HUNTINGTON SNOW

WHO SHARES WITH ME THE CHARMING SECRET
OF THE REAL NEYRONNES

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C. F. BUTLER
PLACE
7.46

NOTE

ALL the characters in this story are imaginary. And I hope that the scene is sufficiently disguised as to be unrecognizable. With the exception of one great historic event, that picturesque and delightful village on its hill-top has known no form of battle, murder, or sudden death, so far as I have been able to discover, for at least three hundred years. Since the end of the Wars of Religion, I feel sure that nothing but the French Revolution has disturbed its calm. And, like the narrator of my story, I hope to go back to it, and find it still unspoiled.

K. W.

HÔTEL DU ROY RENÉ
AIX-EN-PROVENCE

***March*, 1934**

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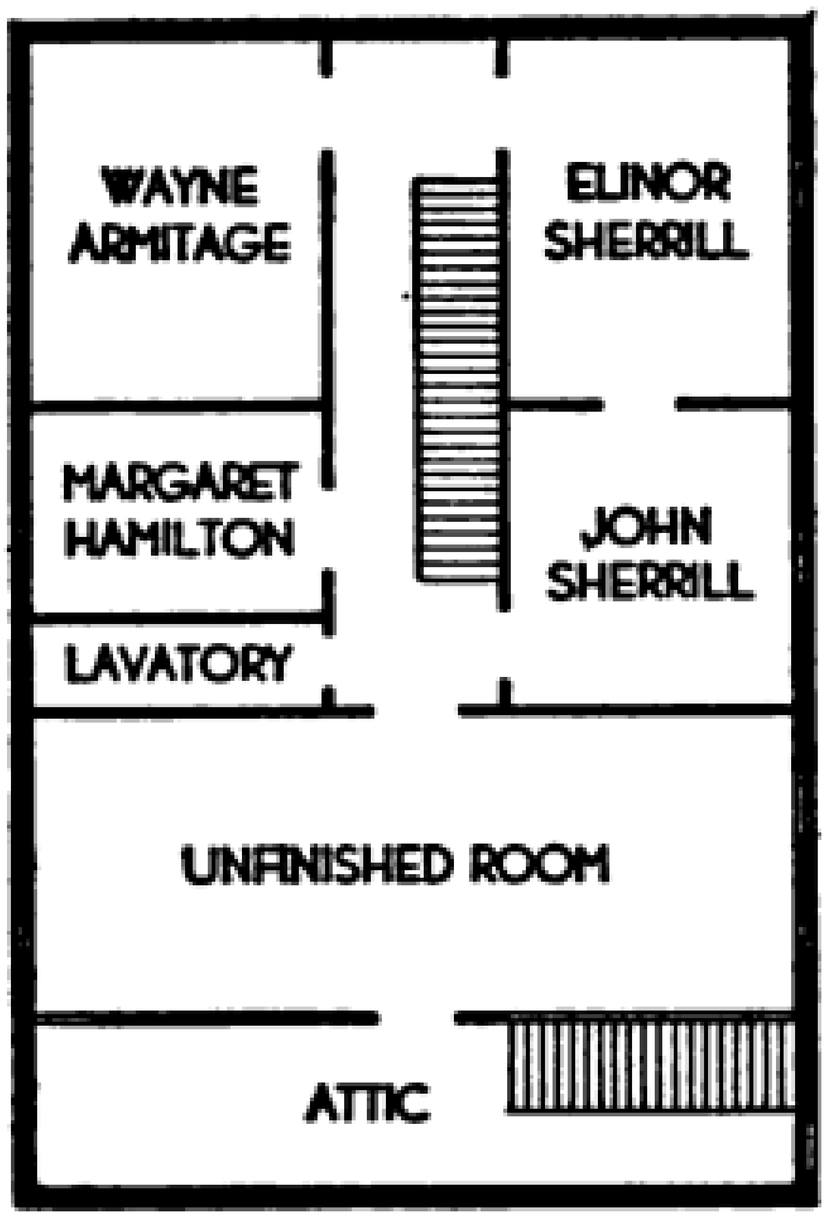

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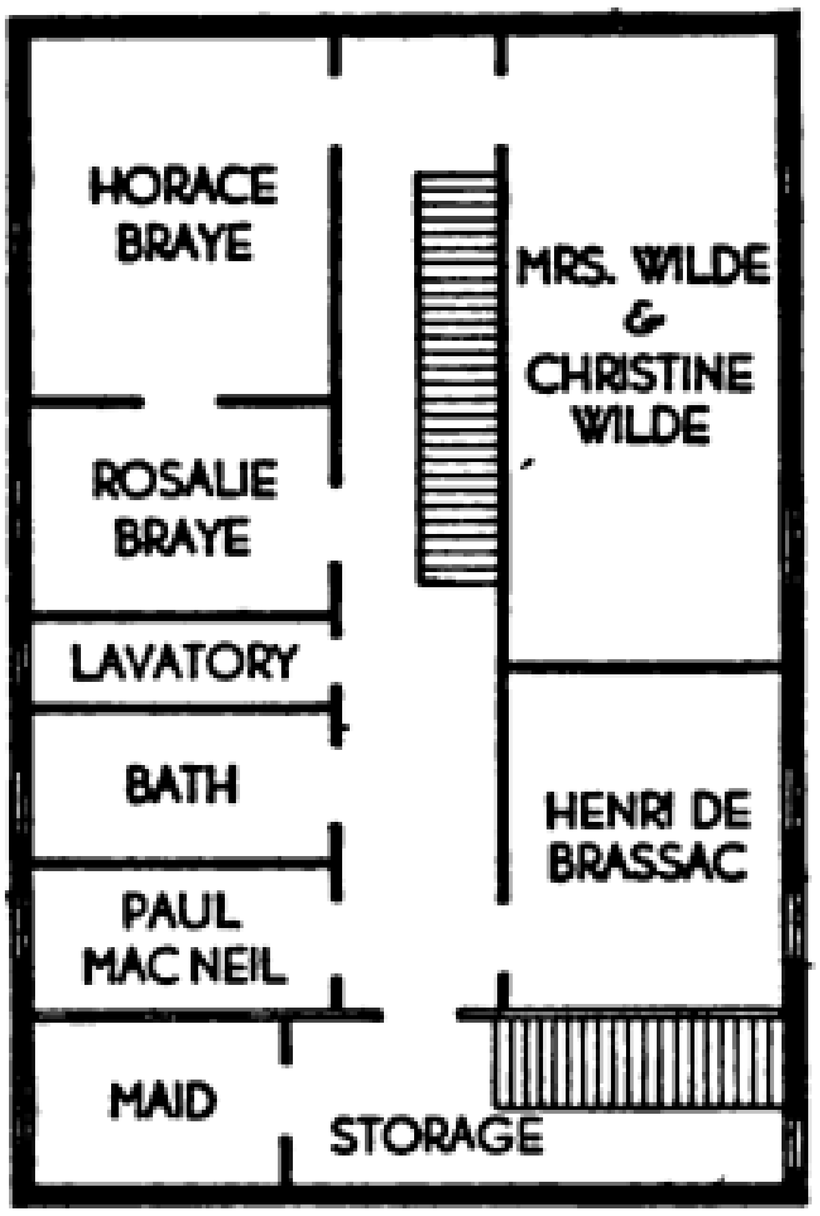

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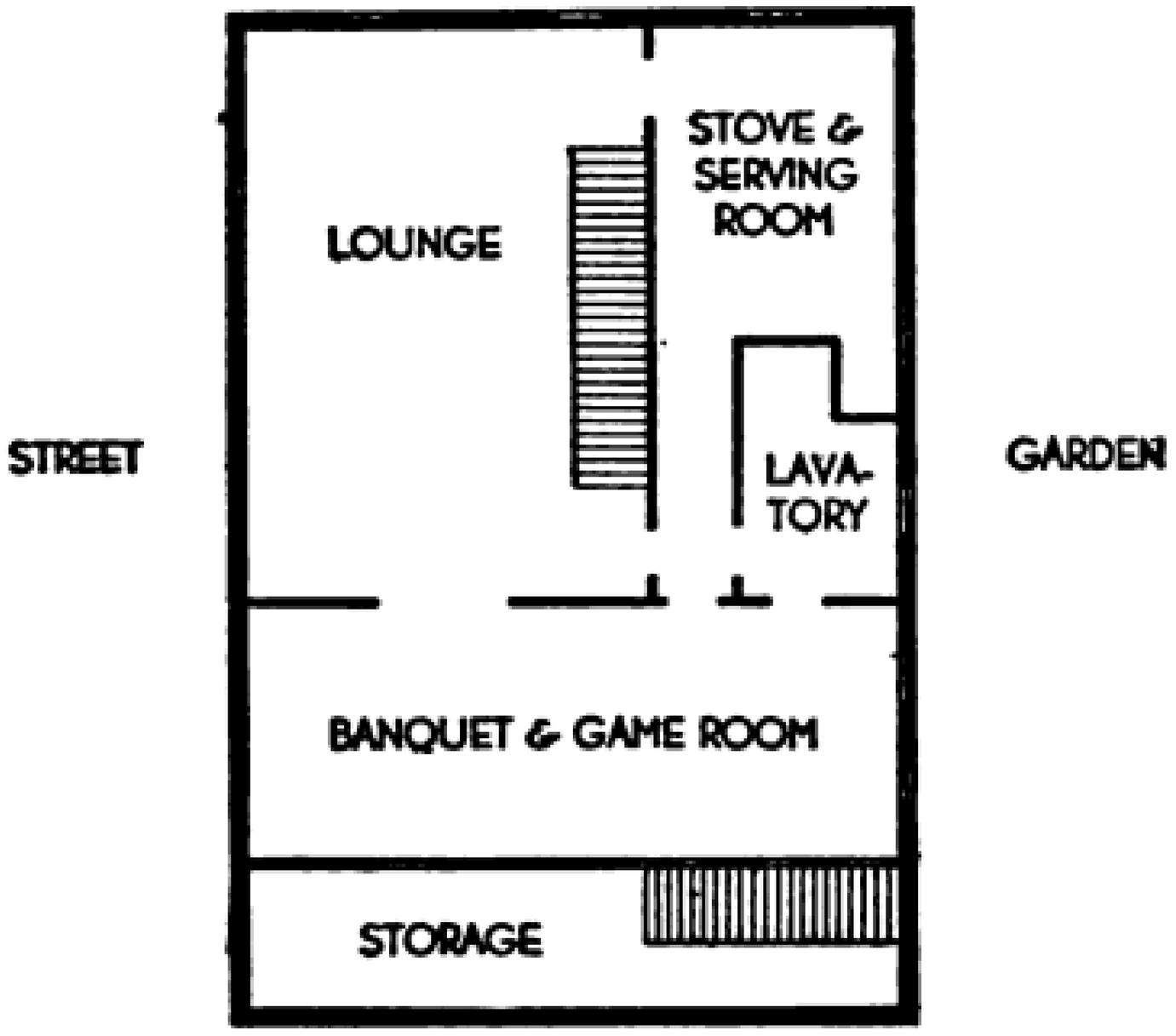

GROUND FLOOR

PAVILLON ANNEXE
Auberge de Vieux Neyronnes

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Murder in a Walled Town

CHAPTER I

I COME TO NEYRONNES

PEOPLE say a great deal, I've noticed, about large events that result from small causes: a woman rushes back to be sure she has turned off the hot water, and misses the train that is swept off the bridge in the flood — that sort of thing. Life and conversation are full of it. But it seems to me that the resultance of small events from large causes is just as interesting — only 'small' and 'large' are not really the words I mean. What I am thinking of is the momentous, indeed the all-important, personal consequences which may spring from broad impersonal movements, situations, affairs. It was this kind of thing which happened to us all, that summer at Neyronnes.

On the nineteenth of April, 1933, the United States of America went off the gold standard. And because of that incident in international finance, life and death and romance and mystery and tragedy and renewal came to a group of ordinary individuals in a small village in central France. Because our country 'went off gold,' our strangely assorted group of Americans gathered at Neyronnes in the first place. Because we came there and stayed there, all our lives were changed and for some among us life ended; but hope and happiness came to others — new happiness and new hope. In the long run

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that curious story of Neyronnes is a good story, a story that 'comes out well.' Christine, thank God, is happy. It seems to me that that is all that really matters, but of course I know that my point of view is completely biased where Christine is concerned! And I am really thinking of everyone when I say that the story ends well. Justice triumphed: of that I do feel convinced, for all the strangeness and the dreadfulness of what happened to us there.

But of course at the beginning no one could have guessed that there was going to be a story at Neyronnes at all....

I was on the high seas when the United States went off the gold standard. In that, I was like Monsieur Herriot: he was voyaging westbound on the *Ile-de-France* and I was on my way to Europe on the *Paris*, and the ships passed and saluted somewhere toward the middle of the Atlantic. But unlike Monsieur Herriot, I didn't take the matter of the gold standard itself very seriously.

As a matter of fact, I was thinking very busily about other things. I was on my way to Geneva to do a bit of research work at the International Labor Office, and of course I just went ahead. My job is teaching history, but I have always been interested in labor matters, and when this chance came my way I had jumped at it, naturally. And I was so interested in everything that was going on there — in the Labor Office, and the League, and Geneva itself — that it just didn't occur to me to think of international finance in any personal way. In spite of the fact that I teach history, I haven't traveled much abroad, and foreign exchange was just foreign exchange: if the Swiss franc was twenty-three cents instead of twenty, it didn't

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mean a lot to me. But by June the dollar was really dropping.

Long before the nineteenth of April, I had planned a summer's holiday: I was going to France, and England, and maybe Italy, too. I had worked out what a trip ought to cost, and I thought I could manage it. And what I wanted to see, what I wanted to learn about, was the real country. I knew Paris, and London, fairly well; but what I had a yearning to become acquainted with was the provincial towns, and the villages, and the long stretches of road between the trees and hedgerows; I wanted to see terraces, and vineyards, and arcades, and ancient tumble-down houses, and little old narrow winding streets; I wanted to feast my eyes on feudal castles, and mediæval abbeys, and Gothic churches, and to watch the country people gathering in the little towns on market-day. I wanted a lot...

I had been teaching history in a boys' school near Philadelphia; I hadn't had much money, ever; and what with paying back what I had had to borrow to get through college, and taking care of my mother through several years of invalidism, I had never had anything extra: I had never been able to see the things I had been teaching about. Now my mother was dead. My debts were paid. I had had this bit of a job at Geneva, with two months added to my time off from school and my steamship fare paid one way: when I finished the job I was through, on my own, free, for the rest of the summer. But when the dollar began to show that it was dropping, I had to reconstruct my ideas: it looked as if I should have to go straight back home...

Well, I didn't want to do that. I had already bought my return ticket, tourist, with American dollars in Amer-

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ica. But I didn't want to use it right away. I didn't want to give up my hoped-for glimpse of the 'real country' in foreign lands.

And then, all of a sudden, I thought of Neyronnes, and remembered what an artist friend had told me about it. One of the most picturesque places in France, he had said. Unspoiled. Cheap. No Americans there, no English. A tiny walled village on a hill, with a good little inn where you could live for only a little over a dollar a day. And study. He said it was absolutely quiet, remote from the tourist trails and from all the currents of modern life, and nothing ever happened to disturb you or interrupt your work, for weeks on end.

I realized that I should have to give up the summer's travel that I had planned, but I could still have an interesting European holiday, quiet, unusual, 'real.' I cashed a good deal of money in French francs, before the dollar should drop farther, and I crossed the border into France.

On a map of Europe, or even a map of France, it doesn't look to be a long distance from Geneva to Neyronnes, because Neyronnes (although of course it isn't on any map smaller than the large-scale Michelin) is not far from the center of France. But central France is a pretty big locality. And when I talk of it, I am no more definite than that about the whereabouts of this little walled village of ours. I love Neyronnes, and I want to go back to it and find it still unspoiled. It is all that my painter friend told me — all that and more; but although murder couldn't spoil it, tourists could. Not from me — nor yet from Christine — are any tourists going to find out where it is! And all that I need say here about its situation is just that I had to change cars a lot, and wan-

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der around in a surprising fashion over the map of France, before I ever got to the place at all.

Finally I decided to spend the night in the nearest city and go out in the morning by a fairly early train. Not that there was a train to Neyronnes itself. The railroad station was at a little town in the valley, several miles away. But I had a leisurely breakfast, trying to get used to the French way of doing things and not to feel guiltily lazy over having breakfast in bed; and then I picked up my old Gladstone and got into a third-class compartment on a little train and traveled along — still in the utmost leisure, as if the train were just having a pleasant stroll — for some time; and when I got out at the station of Jeanniot, I was ready to walk.

Here was I, then, on a beautiful June morning, with my bag in my hand and francs in my pocket to a tune somewhat less gay and affluent than the rhythm of twenty-five to the dollar, and I was stepping out of the railroad station into Jeanniot's Place de la Gare. Here was I, Wayne Armitage, not many years out of college and as poor as a church mouse, knowing perfectly well that with the dollar falling I ought to be going home and absolutely determined to do nothing of the kind.

As I went out past the exit barrier, it occurred to me that I'd better ask the way to Neyronnes; and then — this seems ridiculous, but it's true — it burst upon me for the first time that I knew almost no French! I simply hadn't realized it before. I'd got along with English everywhere, without any trouble... Well, now I was in the country — the 'real country' that I had always wanted to see and learn about. I should just have to use what brains I had and what French I could remember. There was a man with an automobile, near me at the

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curb, and a man with a donkey-cart. I felt less shy of the carter, and I went up to him and waved my hand toward the right.

'Neyronnes?' I said inquiringly. '*Là?*'

The carter's gesture embraced all the landscape to the left, and he shook his head with emphasis.

'Pareecy!' he replied; and then, before I could puzzle out what that was, he poured forth a torrent of directions, of which, not unnaturally, I could understand not one word.

'*Houp-là!*' cried the man in the automobile. He got out of his car and approached me, and from the moment my eye fell upon that jovial, friendly countenance I liked that man. He was young, and good-looking, and broad-shouldered, and gay; he had a big hearty voice and a big hearty laugh, and I felt as if he might once have been a famous college athlete, if he had been an American. He came up to me now, and addressed me in slow, bookish, perfect English — the English of a man who has studied it conscientiously and successfully, but has never spoken it much.

'I am going to Neyronnes,' he said. 'You will come with me?' And he picked up my bag, set it in the tonneau of his sedan, and waved his arm in a broad gesture to indicate my place beside him in the car. 'I live in Neyronnes,' he explained, as I tried to thank him for his kindness. 'My father has been interested in the restoration. I,' he added simply, 'I keep the inn. If you wish to stay at the inn, my wife and I shall be most happy to receive you. If you do not wish to stay, we shall be glad to help you to see Neyronnes in the time at your disposal.'

It was a formal speech, but he made it with unconsidered ease; and it gave me my first experience of the per-

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fect naturalness of French courtesy — although I realized then as later that my host, whose father had been 'interested in the restoration' of the old *cité*, was no ordinary hotel-keeper! Of course I told him that I was planning to stay at the inn, and was delighted at the prospect. And so I rode like a prince into Neyronnes.

We hopped out of Jeanniot and turned from the highway into a byroad that wound around between hedgerows. There was nothing spectacular about it, but it had charm — a gentle country scene. Then we swung around at the foot of a little hill, and my host pointed upward: there were the crumbling thirteenth-century ramparts, there was the broad grassy space that had once been the Lists where tournaments were held, there was the church-tower.

We turned away, lost sight of the citadel, seemed to pass it by, swung back again, and suddenly began to climb steeply, and then passed through a narrow old arched gate. We were in a space between fortress walls now, and the narrow road, still steeply mounting, turned sharply at a right angle within that enclosure. On our left was the doorway of an ancient church built into the fortifications. On our right, touching the ramparts, was the wall of a house with beautiful Renaissance windows, a house that had been a very noble dwelling centuries ago. Straight ahead of us the road narrowed still more to go under a portcullis and through a tower which formed, with its two pointed arches, the double inner gate of the *enceinte*. And just inside that was another Renaissance house, with windows more beautiful still.

The whole thing made the most picturesque scene that my eyes had ever fallen upon. And it was all so *real*. All the mediæval history that I had ever studied and taught

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had come to life before me. Here was the Europe I had come to see.... Brinton Elliott, my painter friend, had told me that this fortress-village was almost a 'little Carcassonne'; like the peasant in the song, I never have seen Carcassonne; but as we drove through the triple gate of Neyronnes I felt that I need ask no more of perfection. This was enough.

And I was so fascinated, so absorbed, as the little village street stretched its short length before me between ancient tumble-down cottage walls, that I never saw a plain and prosaic building on my left, just beyond the little gardened space near the church that surrounded the tiny community's monument to its war dead. It was a building larger than the others, scarcely more than two hundred years old, not at all quaint, and in perfect repair. I saw it, as it happened, soon enough. And of course I did not know that Christine Wilde was standing in one of the upper windows of that plain building, telling her mother that Monsieur Delande seemed to be bringing a new guest to the inn....

The car made its way slowly down the little street, honking as it approached a corner where it seemed to my unaccustomed eye that no turn could possibly be made. But my host swung quickly and easily around the curve and into an even narrower bit of road under the overhanging beamed façade of an extraordinarily fine fourteenth-century dwelling-house. And then, as we entered the Place des Halles of Neyronnes, I knew that my enthusiasm at the gate had been only a dim foretaste of the rapture which awaited me here. I have come to know since that, although mediæval town gates are no great rarity in France, such a *place* as that of Neyronnes is almost unique. At the time I just felt that this was too good to be true.

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In the center of a broad cobbled square rose an enormous linden tree, outspreading its perfectly proportioned branches to form a thick canopy of protection as well as shade. Rustic chairs and tables looked homelike and inviting under the tree, but they were not what held my attention. On the opposite side of the square, as we turned into it, was an ancient crooked building with a wide beamed gallery like a veranda, and across a little cobbled alleyway from this engaging structure was a beautiful thirteenth-century house, perfect with its beams, its corbels, its small-paned windows, even the vines that grew in profusion about the entrance, and the girl in white lace cap and fichu who was leaning against the lintel of the door. At right angles, and farther back, was a smaller, plainer building, also beamed; and next to it stood another good old dwelling-house, with vines and a sundial; the narrow street by which we had entered ran along the side of this house. Behind us, too, was a row of three or four picturesque ancient houses, at the architectural details of which I did not then glance. Only on the fourth side of the *Place* was there any intrusion of the commonplace; and even here the heavy stone houses were not new, although the hand of 'modernization' in the way of doors and windows had not been arrested in time, and the buildings had probably never been as fine architecturally as their neighbors.

And yet, I felt then, and I have never ceased to feel, that the more or less ordinary quality of the fourth side of the broad *Place* at Neyronnes gave its own *cachet* of reality to the whole extraordinary scene: this was no show-piece, but the central square of a village where people lived; these houses were their homes, their shops, the inn, the museum. And later, as we visitors used to

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sit, according to our custom, in the roomy gallery under the overhanging upper story of the building that was the museum, we scarcely saw the 'modern' houses at all. We looked out at the *Place*, and the streets and paths which came into it, and the roofs of other buildings where the roads sloped downhill, and everything that we saw was picturesque to the point of being theatrical. Even to the movements of the peasants crossing the square with an occasional donkey, the old women and children who came to get water at the fountain in the corner farthest from us, the whole scene was like the stage at some fascinating play.

My host, whom I now knew as Monsieur Delande, drove around the square and stopped his car in front of the charming thirteenth-century building, which, to my astonishment and delight, I saw to be the inn. The girl with the white fichu had disappeared, and in a moment a buxom and very pretty young woman appeared in her stead. She was plump and smiling, like her husband, but what with him was heartiness became with her an unswerving calm; I never saw Madame Delande ruffled or harassed; neither she nor her husband ever looked tired. And yet, how hard they worked! And how much they had to try them, that summer when the United States went off the gold standard and a miscellaneous bunch of American tourists sought cheap living under their ancient hospitable roof!

Monsieur took out my bag. He drove his car into the mediæval building at one side, which was, I now saw, the inn's garage. The girl with the fichu came back, and it was explained to me that the single rooms with hot and cold running water were in the *pavillon annexe*, a few steps back, near the church, and that she would escort me

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there. It was also explained to me that if I stayed eight days or longer the rate for room and board complete would be thirty francs a day. And when I had signified my assent to all this, the girl with the fichu picked up my old Gladstone as easily as if it had been a woman's overnight bag and led me up another street, no wider than an alley, that wound between some fine old houses and the ruins of other fine old houses and then in a few yards came out somewhat surprisingly on the other little *place*, just inside the gate.

Here, facing the gate and the war memorial, and at right angles to the back of the church and the funny little *Mairie*, was the *pavillon annexe*. It was the plain, large, unromantic structure, probably of the early eighteenth century, which I had not noticed when we came in. Nothing could have looked less like my idea of a *pavillon* than this solid rectangular building; but it looked, as it was, comfortable. With its heavy walls within and without, it looked quiet, too.

The front door opened directly into a big uncarpeted room that had some good furniture in it, a center table with writing-materials, and on one side, under a window, a phonograph. The stairs led up from this room, and we climbed two flights. The maid showed me into a small, simple, neat, and not uninviting bedroom, set down my bag, and opened the shutters of the two windows. And even as she went out of the door I hurried to the front window and stood there for a long time looking at the view. Then, with the conscious deliberation born of deep satisfaction, I began to unpack....

This was what I had been longing to find. It was genuine. It was interesting. It was peaceful. It was cheap. Here I would stay, and read, and study, and take

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long walks, and enjoy a real vacation, in solitude. It came over me suddenly that I had never had a 'real vacation,' in that sense, in my life. There had always been some worry, some burden, some distraction, the intrusion of some troublesome event. Here there was nothing. In spite of the fall of the dollar, there was nothing to worry me now, in this fascinating mediæval village where I could live in sufficient modern comfort for thirty francs a day!

I went back to the window, and looked out at the fortress gate, and the old church, and the ancient stone cottage with its outside flight of steps, across the way. Beyond the gate-tower other hillocks raised their soft green heights above the valley, and far away the distant mountains marked the horizon with their hazy blue rim. Peaceful...

And as I stood there drinking in the charm and restfulness of it all, a big automobile came from the direction of the inn, turned sharply into the little *place*, and stopped under my window, at the *pavillon* door. I looked at it idly; but I have the American's instinctive — I fear, irremediable — interest in motor cars: I had never been able to own one, but I had long ago learned to drive; and when I see an automobile I know, without stopping to think how, what kind of car it is. I had a queer little feeling, now, that my peace was threatened, that my remoteness was somehow broken in upon. It was a Packard car that was standing under my window in Neyronnes.

Of course I told myself at once that it was silly to be disturbed by that: an American make of car was no sign of the presence of Americans! A great many French people had American automobiles. Besides, Elliott had

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told me that Swiss travelers sometimes came to Neyronnes, and of course Switzerland teemed with American motor cars. I repeated to myself that there was no sense in being afraid that my solitude would be sacrificed to the presence of my fellow-countrymen. And just at that moment a girl stepped out of the car, a girl who was unmistakably American, and whose appearance filled me, astonishingly, with delight instead of a selfish dismay.

She was tall, and slender, and young, and very pretty. Soft hair caught the sunshine in golden lights in its masses of chestnut brown, and waved in graceful natural curls on a beautifully modeled sunburnt neck. Strong sunburnt arms were as firm and able-looking as they were well-formed and comely in her sleeveless dress of burnt-orange stuff. From the curve of her head to the line of her perfect ankles and her slender feet, every contour was lovely. And she was as unconscious as Queen Victoria, standing there.

I don't know exactly why I was so sure she was American: it may have been her ankles, and her feet in those well-cut sport shoes; it may have been her air of independence, along with competence and charm; when I looked more closely at her face, as she continued to stand there at the doorstep, I saw that her expression held none of the carefree happiness one likes to associate with pretty and well-to-do young American girls. Her big brown eyes troubled me: they not only looked anxious, smitten with a chronic anxiety; they looked somehow unnatural, as if she were trapped or caged. Independent, yes, in a sense. But not the happiest sense. Independent by nature, but certainly not free.

She just stood there quietly, for several minutes, while the engine of the car purred in its opulent quietness be-

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hind her. Then she spoke, raising her voice just a little to reach someone in the house.

'Aren't you ready?' she asked. 'Do you want any help?'

On the floor below me a window opened, and out of it came a voice. 'Oh, I've changed my mind,' it said. It was a woman's voice, and it continued: 'I don't want to go, after all. We couldn't get back in time for lunch.'

'But I thought you wanted to lunch at a restaurant,' the girl said. 'And we had made the appointment at the hairdresser's.'

'Well, I've changed my mind. Go and unmake the appointment. And will you tell Monsieur Delande that I cannot eat *écrivisses* with all that pepper in the sauce? I simply will not stay here if I can't get the food I want. But I feel tired. I don't want to take that long drive to the city. Put the car away.'

The girl half-turned, hesitated an instant, quickly turned back.

'I might go anyway,' she said. 'I might take Miss Hamilton. She'd like it.'

'And leave me to lunch here alone? Good Heavens, Christine, are you crazy? Anyhow, you've got to talk to Monsieur Delande about the food. Besides, Miss Hamilton is going to play Russian bank with me right after lunch. She couldn't go to the city and get back in time. You know I need someone to put me to sleep: she could not go, possibly. As for your going without me — I never heard of such a thing! You put the car away this minute, and then telephone to the hairdresser that I'm not coming. Then I think it wouldn't be a bad thing if you did my hair yourself, with that dry-shampoo stuff. Hurry up.'

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'All right, mother,' the girl said, in an amiable, matter-of-course fashion, and turned toward the automobile again. But before she got into her luxurious equipage she walked around the engine and looked at it, not lifting the hood, but just regarding the front of the car; and the thing that I saw in her face was tenderness. It made me think of Lindbergh's 'We.' But it made me think of more than that. She was alone here, this girl Christine, with a selfish pig of a mother, and all she really had to love was her car.

And it did not occur to me to lament, now, that the solitude of Neyronnes was non-existent, and that there would be at least three English-speaking females living in the same house with me and chattering all over the place. It is quite true, and I confess it without shame, that at that moment and from that moment I had forgotten all about solitude, in thinking of the strange look in a girl's eyes — eyes brown and wide and unnaturally bright, set far apart below a broad forehead in a lovely pale face. If she had been happy, she would have been very beautiful, this girl Christine. As it was, she was a troubling creature: there was something about her that, in this first glimpse certainly, I could not understand.

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CHAPTER II

I GREET OTHER REFUGEES

By the time I had finished unpacking, had filled in the police blank which took the place of hotel registration, and had written a note to Geneva to have my box of books sent on to me here, it was after twelve o'clock. Except for Christine's appearance under my window, there had been nothing to molest the quiet of the morning: a few cars had passed, some low French voices had sounded undisturbingly from outside, there had been a few barely audible movements within the house. At noon the bells in the church-tower rang, with a deep, musical note, and in the fields out beyond the ramparts I could indistinctly see people moving about.

Shortly before half-past twelve I locked the door of my room behind me and walked down the street and around the sharp corner under the handsome fourteenth-century mansion, and so into the *Place*. Madame my hostess was sitting at a table in front of the inn door, and although she spoke no English she made me understand, as I approached her, that I might have luncheon either in the house or on the veranda opposite, which she called the *galerie*. I chose the *galerie*, and she said, '*Tout de suite*,' and signaled to the maid. And I went into the veranda and waited while my table was being set.

It was not a veranda at all, but a broad space, as wide as a good-sized American porch, under the built-out upper story of a six-hundred-year-old house. The floor was of hard pebbled dirt, and on the outside, between

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the supporting pillars, a wall had been built up knee-high and set with bright geraniums in pots. Nasturtiums grew in a bed along the veranda, and vines clambered up the side of the house, with its plaster wall and old red beams. Sitting in the wicker chairs of the *galerie*, behind that flowered proscenium, it was exactly as if one looked out from a box at a play!

But when I went in to have my luncheon, there was no one there. A table laid for one guest only stood at the far end, next to the house wall. My own table was being set near the end closest to the entrance, which was the end closest to the door of the inn. And I was well along in my hors d'œuvres before the occupant of the second table appeared.

I was thinking about the girl Christine, and not unnaturally I was wondering whether I should see her at lunch, and also how long it would be before, in the etiquette which obtains among traveling fellow-countrymen, I might venture to introduce myself to her, when I heard a little scuffle on the dirt floor quite near me; and, looking around hastily, I saw a dog. If I had been surprised by the sight of the opulent Packard car and the lovely American girl in the simple fastnesses of Neyronnes, I was scarcely less surprised by this dog. For I had never seen a dog quite like him; I had rarely seen so noble a dog before.

His body was built much like an Irish terrier's, although a little larger, but his hair was not rough and reddish, but almost silky, and blue-black. He had a 'boxed jaw' and a handsome squared beard, and about midway in his long and shapely head his eyes looked out upon the world with an expression of deep thoughtfulness and the kindliest good-will. He had none of an

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Irish terrier's look of pugnacity nor a Scotty's air of impenetrable reserve nor the curious childlike attractiveness of a Sealyham, nor was he big and powerful like an Airedale; but he seemed to me to possess the most admirable charms of all these breeds; and he was far more beautiful than any of them. I like dogs, and I've known a good many, but this one was new to me. In any case, however, I was his firm friend at first sight. He stopped, looked at me, wagged his tail, and approached closer. From around the curve of the cobbled *ruelle* someone spoke to him.

'Fergus,' said a woman's voice, 'you must remember that not everyone likes dogs.'

'I do,' I said, and jumped to my feet as the dog's mistress came into the *galerie*.

As I recall my instantaneous recognition of Miss Hamilton's voice as American — the natural instantaneous recognition of any American voice — I am conscious of a little wave of irritation over the so frequent implication that an 'American' voice is a voice which is uncultivated or harsh or drawling or in some way necessarily ugly. Many American voices are unpleasing, I know, just as many English voices are unpleasing; but the English language as spoken by an American of cultivation and good breeding is certainly as fair-sounding a thing as the English language can be; it was such a voice that I heard speaking now. The girl Christine and her mother had clear and well-modulated and attractive voices, too, even though the older woman's tones broke into such peevish notes. But Miss Hamilton's voice was really beautiful, and I expected to see a very personable, not to say impressive, individual come into the *galerie* in the wake of the handsome dog.

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What I saw was a middle-aged woman of average height, insignificant features and coloring, tired gray eyes, dressed in an old-fashioned jacket suit that was actually ragged. Naturally I did not observe many details about her in that first moment, but even then I noticed that her coat was threadbare and had been darned. And even in that first quarter-hour I felt, rather than saw, that she was completely indifferent to her shabbiness. I had never seen an American woman who looked so poor, and I had never seen any human being who seemed more of an aristocrat.

She answered my somewhat impulsive remark.

'I'm glad you like dogs,' she said, 'but you mustn't let Fergus and me interrupt your luncheon. Sit down.'

I continued to stand, and patted the dog's head.

'Won't you let me introduce myself?' I asked. And at that she smiled.

'They can't pronounce your name,' she told me, 'but I already know something about you. You are an American. You have just come from Switzerland. You like Neyronnes. You are going to stay awhile. Aurélie has told me all that already. Aurélie is the plump maid. She has also told me that you are *très gentil* and that she hopes Mrs. Wilde and Miss Wilde and I will find you *sympathique*.' She laughed. 'You didn't expect to meet any other Americans here, did you?'

'Well, no,' I admitted. And she chuckled again.

'If you will have your table moved up to the other end, near mine,' she suggested, 'I will tell you about us while you eat your luncheon — while we eat our luncheon, I should say.'

Whereupon, naturally, I picked up my little table and moved it myself. The waitress (there were only

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two maidservants in constant attendance at the Auberge de Vieux Neyronnes, and this was the other one) brought my neighbor's hors d'œuvres and rearranged my *couvert*. The dog stretched himself out beside his mistress's chair; and our tables were close enough together for conversation but not close enough to feel crowded. I thought it a pleasant arrangement.

'My name,' said my neighbor, 'is Margaret Hamilton. I fancy that I am perhaps a very little less than twice your age, and I come from New York. My *carte d'identité* declares that I am a woman without profession.'

'My name,' I responded, in the same Arabian-Nights fashion, 'is Wayne Armitage. I am twenty-seven years old, and I teach history in a boys' school in Paoli, Pennsylvania.'

'Ah,' she remarked, 'you are a little older than you look. But in the Middle Ages I might well have been your mother. As your history will have taught you, we married young in those days.'

Her directness, and her little air of impersonal amusement, robbed this speech of any challenge to gallantry, and she did not wait, indeed, for any reply. She changed the subject, and went right on:

'Your compatriots in Neyronnes number three at present. All females. All stuck.'

'Stuck?' I echoed. And she chuckled again. I was beginning to realize that amusement was never far from those gray eyes that looked so tired beneath her lined forehead and her graying drab-brown hair. And when she talked in her odd, gay, individual fashion, her mouth, which in repose was merely nondescript, became somehow almost fascinating, so alive was it, so alive did her whole face become.

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'Stuck,' she repeated. 'Stranded. How are the mighty fallen — I mean the mighty dollars, my child. They are dropping to a new low...'

'Oh!' I cried, in sudden understanding. 'That's why I'm here, too!'

'I thought,' said Miss Hamilton, 'that that was possible.' And the tiny wrinkles played about her eyes and mouth as mirthfully as if they had been dimples, as mirthfully as if she had been carefree, and pretty, and young. Here was someone, certainly, who could contemplate the fall of the dollar, even the fact of being 'stranded,' with genuine amusement.

And then she held her hand aloft for a moment in the consumption of an olive, and I saw, more clearly than I had yet seen it, the fringiness about her cuff. I saw, too, that at the elbow the sleeve of her jacket would soon be worn through completely where it was already darned. I felt a little embarrassed all of a sudden, and, as so often happens in such cases, I took refuge in talking about myself. I told her about my stay in Geneva, and my hopes for a summer's traveling, and my selection of Neyronnes as a haven when the dollar went down; and she was sympathetic, and serious.

'You couldn't have made a better choice,' she assured me. 'I know France pretty well, and I don't know any place where you could get more real reward for so little money — in the kind of reality you want. Neyronnes is a perfectly fascinating spot; I come here often. And the inn is admirable: it is well-kept and comfortable, and the food is delicious. The Delandes are very nice people, and very kind. You'll love Neyronnes, I know, and everything about it. And, speaking of food, here come the *écrivisses*.'

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It was my introduction to those craw-dads of the mountain streams of France, which are served in so many different ways according to the specialty of the region, and I found them very tasty. But at the moment I did not give this *pièce de résistance* the attention it deserved. The appearance of the *écrivisses* made me think of Christine's mother, and I found myself wondering, for the sake of Christine's peace of mind, whether they would be peppery. Mine were. And my new neighbor noticed that, too.

'They have two ways of doing the *écrivisses* here,' she said. 'This way uses a lot of pepper. But if there is too much for your individual taste, all you have to do is to say so, and the next time yours will be cooked with less seasoning. Almost all Mrs. Wilde's food is cooked specially for her. Mrs. Wilde,' she added, 'is an invalid.'

I thought of the Packard.

'Stranded, too?' I asked.

'Oh, yes,' Miss Hamilton answered easily. 'The Wildes are stranded, too. The Wildes are "absolutely broke." If there is one thing that this *crise* has probably taught you already, Mr. Armitage, it is that there are marked degrees to absolute "broke-ness."'

Her voice was whimsical, but it was kind as well. I confess that for the moment I did not feel quite sure what she was talking about. All I could think of to say was that it must be very hard to be worried about money when one was ill.

'Yes,' she said, 'it must be. Mrs. Wilde is a very pathetic woman. I am hoping,' she went on, in her lovely voice, 'that your being here will pep her up a bit.'

What I felt was a quick resentment at being expected to pep up Mrs. Wilde. From what I had heard of her

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conversation, from what it had told me of her attitude toward her child and her neighbors, I wished only to give Mrs. Wilde a good hard slap — and since that was manifestly impossible, a good cold shoulder. But of course I could see that she was pathetic: an invalid, in exile, suffering, suddenly poor...

'I had hoped,' Miss Hamilton continued, 'that Fergus would entertain her. But unfortunately she isn't interested in dogs.'

At the sound of his name, Fergus looked up and yawned pleasantly. And as I agreed that it was indeed unfortunate for anyone not to be interested in canines, I took the liberty of asking what kind of dog Fergus was.

'A Kerry blue terrier,' his mistress answered. 'I got him in England five years ago. I'll spare you the list of his ancestors' and relations' championships, and just tell you at once that he himself has never been shown. He is simply my pet dog, and a good one — though he's a trifle big to live in one room in a hotel. When I got him my life was — er — less confined. But,' she added cheerfully, without a pause, 'he is very adaptable. He is always well-behaved, and I think he is happy.'

Well, I thought to myself, Miss Hamilton loved her dog. The girl Christine loved her car. And Christine's mother? Christine's mother loved nothing in the world but Mrs. Wilde, I was already prepared to guess.

A few cars were driving one by one into the *Place*, coming by the narrow street which was the only entrance for vehicles, circling the big linden, parking on the grass plot by the fourth side of the square, and depositing their passengers to go into the house for luncheon or pause under the tree for *apéritifs*.

'Neyronnes is famous among the French, although

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very few foreigners know about it,' Miss Hamilton remarked. 'There are often a good many people here on Saturday and Sunday, and after the fourteenth of July — or rather, beginning with the fourteenth of July — there is a real "summer season," and the *auberge* is usually full. But now it is very quiet: nobody at the inn except us poor Americans. We have some interesting resident neighbors, though. That beautiful house on the corner, as you come into the *Place*, is the summer home of a very charming countess who was born near here. It is the realest restoration I have ever seen — if only they could have done Carcassonne like that! And on the *chemin de ronde* ——'

She broke off suddenly. Christine Wilde came out of the inn, brilliant in her orange dress against the shadowy interior, and crossed the cobbles and the *galerie*, swiftly, to our tables.

'Miss Hamilton,' she began, without apology, 'mother says, will you please come and play Russian bank with her just as soon as you finish your luncheon?'

'Certainly,' said Miss Hamilton, and rose at once. 'Is she ready now? I'll come right away. May I present Mr. Armitage? Miss Wilde will tell you more about Neyronnes, Mr. Armitage. I was just beginning, Christine, with some of the handsome houses on the *chemin de ronde*.'

'Oh.' Miss Wilde's monosyllable sounded absent-minded, and, I thought, none too pleased. Miss Hamilton went into the inn, with her dog at her heels, and Christine sat down abruptly.

'Miss Hamilton is awfully nice. She is so kind to mother,' she said. 'My mother,' she added, 'is an invalid. And naturally she gets a trifle bored in a quiet little

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place like this. She will be glad to meet you, I am sure, Mr. — what is your name? Oh, Armitage? Thank you. As I was saying, Mr. Armitage, I am sure she will be glad to meet you. It will give her a new interest.'

I felt, this time, quite definitely annoyed. It was not that I was unwilling to be kind to a chance acquaintance who was so unfortunate as to be an invalid. It was that both Miss Hamilton and Christine spoke as if entertaining Mrs. Wilde would naturally constitute my first and keenest desire...

Had I come to a walled village in the middle of France to give a new interest to a selfish sick woman, I asked myself? I'd be hanged if I had! And I was about to change the subject as pointedly as politeness would allow, when I caught again the troubled look in the girl's bright eyes.

'I shall be very glad to meet your mother,' I said, instead. And Christine answered as if that were a matter of course.

'Oh, yes,' she said, 'everyone is. My mother is very charming, Mr. Armitage. Everyone adores her.'

I though of the conversation I had overheard.

'Perhaps she will let me keep her company sometimes when you are out in your car,' I ventured. But at that Christine looked puzzled.

'Out in the car?' she echoed. 'But I don't go out in the car without my mother, except for little errands, and they never take long. It is quite true,' she added weightily, 'that mother doesn't care much for going on little drives herself, so we don't use the car a great deal. But of course I never take it out for pleasure unless my mother goes along.'

'Well,' I began, knowing that what I wanted to say

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sounded silly, but feeling that Christine's entertainment was almost as important as her mother's, and determined to put my oar in somehow, 'I confess that when I saw that big car of yours, and saw that you drove it, I was seized with the feverish hope that you might be so kind as to show me a little of the country — with Miss Hamilton, if your mother didn't feel like going, too...'

'Oh, no!' cried Christine. Then, showing a little normal embarrassment on the heels of this almost automatic reaction, she gave a rather awkward little laugh. 'Please excuse me. I didn't mean to be rude. Of course I see your point of view. But of course I couldn't go for a drive without my mother, and, as I told you, she doesn't enjoy motoring very much. Mother doesn't like me to take Miss Hamilton, even when I go on an errand,' she added in a matter-of-course fashion, 'because, you see, that leaves her quite alone, and that is so hard for her.'

I gave up.

'If there is any way in which I can be of service to your mother, I shall be very glad,' I lied, and I was rewarded by a hint of real friendliness in Christine's absent-minded smile.

But, needless to say, I was not enjoying this conversation! I was glad to welcome another interruption. This was the appearance of Miss Hamilton once more in the doorway, and with her a radiant vision: a woman whose age might have been anywhere from twenty-five to forty or so, whose chestnut-brown hair waved back beautifully from a broad, low, unlined forehead, whose cheeks and lips were barely touched with make-up that was applied with an artist's hand, and whose exquisitely

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smart blue frock brought out deep and lovely tones in her gray-blue eyes. French, of course, I said to myself — frankly glad to see anyone so vivid and attractive, for as a companionable neighbor Christine had proved a disappointment — a French fellow-boarder, and a very charming one... And then the newcomer spoke one word.

'Christine,' she said.

And as I got to my feet I actually stumbled in my astonishment. That was the voice that had spoken from the window. This was Christine's invalid mother...

She came into the *galerie*, followed by Miss Hamilton — who, it is unnecessary to point out, looked more than ever shabby and middle-aged and insignificant — and by Miss Hamilton's handsome dog. And although she had spoken to her daughter, it was toward me that she advanced, and to me that she held out her hand, while her face lighted up with the most cordial and animated of smiles.

'I am so glad to meet you, Mr. Armitage,' she said. 'I introduce myself, you see, and I welcome you to Neyronnes. I have just been hearing about you from our other compatriot' — she indicated Miss Hamilton with an affable gesture — 'and I am sure you will agree with me that we must all be friends together, we forgotten Americans.' She paused rather dramatically, and Miss Hamilton gave a deprecatory chuckle.

'Oh, come now,' she interposed. 'It isn't so bad as that — "forgotten Americans..."'

Mrs. Wilde raised her hand and let it fall again, both to command silence and to emphasize her pronouncement.

'Oh, yes, it is!' she declared. 'We are all forgotten Americans together, Mr. Armitage. It may not be so bad for you — you are a man. But the rest of us are

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forgotten women, Mr. Armitage, forsaken and stranded by that mad Democratic administration, in this beastly country that defaults on its debts.'

Miss Hamilton had ceased to chuckle. Her face was set in rather hard lines, and as I glanced at her standing there behind the radiant vision that was Christine Wilde's mother, I was surprised to note that her cheeks were flushed, and that she looked as if she were having a hard time to disguise her feelings. It came over me for the first time — and I remembered it later — that self-control, for Margaret Hamilton, was not so easy as she made it appear.

'Don't let us begin with controversial subjects,' she said very quietly. 'I am sure that Mr. Armitage doesn't want to plunge into an international argument before he has been in France twenty-four hours. And you know that I don't agree with your feeling on either of those points, Mrs. Wilde.' She smiled now, gaily again. 'Let's keep the peace,' she concluded. And Mrs. Wilde smiled too.

'Oh, I always want to keep the peace,' she averred. 'I am a most good-natured woman, Mr. Armitage, and absolutely unbiased in my judgments. But I really must warn you, in the most good-natured way, that Miss Hamilton is positively pro-French; I tell her it is nothing short of unpatriotic. But I will tell you right in front of her that I never allow her wrong ideas to stand in the way of our friendship. I always make a point of looking at both sides of a question, myself. Don't you think that is best, Mr. Armitage? Indeed, as I sometimes say to my little girl, I don't know how I could endure my sad life if I hadn't cultivated the power to see other people's points of view. And I want to tell you that

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I am very fond of Miss Hamilton, even if she does stand up for Roosevelt and actually like the French!'

I really felt very much embarrassed, and rather put upon; and I decided that the best way for me to receive this silly speech was to treat it as a joke. All the same, I wasn't going back on my convictions — nor yet on Miss Hamilton. So I laughed, and said, 'So do I,' as lightly and as firmly as I could. And then I added, 'And I hope that you will be generous enough to like me, in spite of my opinions, too. Are you,' I went on, before she could interrupt me, 'staying long in Neyronnes?'

'I fear so,' she said. 'I am the prisoner of poverty. I am absolutely broke. I am one of the victims of this terrible depression, Mr. Armitage. I am staying for some weeks at Neyronnes because the inn is cheap. Of course it is not at all what my little girl and I are used to, as I am sure you understand. But my little girl is happy wherever I am — she is one of those fortunate children whose mother can be a real companion to her, Mr. Armitage. Don't you feel sorry for children whose mothers cannot share their youth? When my little girl says that her mother is her best friend, I know that she is telling the simple truth. And of course that makes it easy for her to endure life in this place. But it is not so easy for me, Mr. Armitage. If I were not naturally unselfish and uncomplaining, I really do not know how I could stand my misfortunes — I really do not know...'

She went on and on. Her voice flowed like some unceasing stream of bright, hard, molten metal. It had no softness in it. I had the feeling that it had almost no sense. And of course it had become apparent to me that Mrs. Wilde was as far from being 'absolutely broke' as she was from being unselfish and uncomplaining.

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As I set down even this much of our conversation, I realize that it may seem altogether trivial and irrelevant. But it is not that, really. For in those first chatty exchanges we all learned a good deal about each other, became fairly well acquainted. And I do want, if I can, to present some picture of us first comers as we were at Neyronnes on my first day there, before anyone had any inkling of tragedy. For when tragedy came it engulfed all four of us — Mrs. Wilde, so utterly selfish, so obvious; Margaret Hamilton, who seemed not to be selfish, and who was certainly very far from obvious; the girl Christine, whose youth was being crushed out of existence by her mother's steam-roller egotism; and even the innocent and puzzled stranger that was myself...

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CHAPTER III

I OVERHEAR A CONVERSATION

NATURALLY enough, I took a dislike to Mrs. Wilde, with her smart clothes and her well-cared-for complexion and her 'animated' ways. Self-conscious, self-righteous, self-centered, absolutely self-absorbed, she seemed never to give a thought to her daughter, or to anyone else. Christine existed merely, one would have concluded, to wait upon her mother, and to flatter her at the same time; and the real tragedy of the situation lay in the fact that Christine seemed long ago to have reached that conclusion herself. Even Miss Hamilton seemed to me to exaggerate Mrs. Wilde's helplessness and pathos, the necessity for being 'kind' to her, for indulging her constantly.

I was forced to admit to myself that Mrs. Wilde had a certain attractiveness; no one could deny that she was 'easy to look at'; and she had a kind of vividness, along with her self-assurance, which gave her naturally the center of the stage. If she had not been such an egotist, she might have been really charming, I thought, in a superficial sort of way. But I did not find her pathetic: I found her detestable. She was worse than a steam-roller. She was a vampire.

But, mercifully, she troubled me very little. The worst of my selfish fears were not realized: I was not called upon to supply Christine's mother with a new interest, nor even to pep her up. We got acquainted with each other, as I have said, in the middle of my first day

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at Neyronnes. But when Mrs. Wilde and Miss Hamilton went off to play Russian bank, and Christine announced that she was going to oil the car, I was left to myself, and I continued to be left to myself through the next few days. I strolled out, that afternoon, to 'poke about' in Neyronnes, and I had a magnificent time. When I came back to the *Place*, at half-past four or so, Christine, in overalls and a jumper, was coming out of the garage, and she laughed in a girl's gay, unself-conscious fashion as she held out grimy hands for me to see.

'I've just finished,' she said. 'It's only the little five-hundred-mile oiling, but it's a dirty job. I love it,' she added. 'Don't you like to get good and dirty, fussing around a car?' And when I admitted that I didn't share that ideal of pleasure, she said, quite simply and naturally, 'I adore it. It makes me feel so free.'

This, certainly, was a different Christine. This was the real one, a thoroughly normal human being... I should have liked to go on talking with her now — an oil-stained girl in overalls — but she remarked immediately that she must go and clean up, and she slipped into the side door of the inn and disappeared.

There were several unexpected passages and ways in and out, around that *auberge* at Neyronnes. I took the more obvious route, by the curving *ruelle*, and I did not meet Christine, nor see or hear her in the *pavillon*.

And the days that followed were quiet and charming. I almost always met Miss Hamilton at mealtimes, and we chatted pleasantly on subjects that were usually completely impersonal. The Wildes ate in the picturesque low-ceilinged room that was the *salle à manger* of the inn, and I saw them very little and spoke with them scarcely at all.

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A good many French people came and went during the daytime, and three days after my arrival a scholarly-looking man with the ribbon of the Legion of Honor in his buttonhole came to stay. He drove up in a small roadster, before luncheon, and settled himself in one of the first-floor rooms of the *pavillon*. Miss Hamilton told me that his name was Henri de Brassac, and that he was very particular about having a room on the garden side of the house — not on the street.

'So Madame has put him in the double room next to the Wildes,' she said. 'It's a big quiet room, under the unfinished part of the second story, and they have taken out the other bed: I hope that he is paying an extra price for a double room and staying an extra long time. It seems that the single rooms on the second floor, the only single rooms that would have suited him, are both engaged from tomorrow. As a matter of fact,' she added, 'it will be much quieter for Mrs. Wilde to have just one man next to her, unless he turns out to be noisy. He doesn't look noisy, does he?'

He didn't. He looked, and was, almost completely silent. Miss Hamilton, with her perfect French and her friendly manners, exchanged a few formal sentences with him on the day after his arrival. But although polite he was certainly not gregarious. Mrs. Wilde ignored him. I think she was prepared automatically to dislike whoever had the room next to hers. She and Christine had the biggest room in the hotel, an enormous chamber with two windows on the garden and one on the street, and to the moment of the Frenchman's advent they had been alone on the first floor.

And yet, on one of my first nights at Neyronnes, I could have sworn that I heard sounds in or near the

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empty storage-loft on that floor, in the middle of the night.

There was a glorious full moon, and I had taken to strolling around Neyronnes fairly late, to get the effect of the walls and the gates and the old buildings in the moonlight. On this particular evening there was a party of some sort in the main building of the inn, and there were a good many people moving about the little citadel. But along about half-past ten it suddenly came on to rain; there was a scattering of the party's guests and a sudden procession of cars out of the village; and I, having been down on the hillside, well below the ramparts, had a steep run to get home.

As I passed the kitchen, I saw both the maids cleaning up after the party, and, as I looked up at the windows of the *pavillon*, I happened to notice that they were all dark. From the street there was a side door into an ancient building which adjoined the *pavillon* and was used as a sort of storage annex to it, and I had already learned to use this as an entrance to the *pavillon* garden — one could go straight through a stone-flagged room where the garden furniture was stored, and out another door into the garden itself. And I remembered Miss Hamilton's telling me that there were stairs from the ground-floor up to a somewhat neglected storage-room on the first story of the ancient annex, and that there a door had been cut in the house wall into the first-floor corridor of the *pavillon* itself. The room occupied by the maid Aurélie also opened out of this storage-room in the older house.

By the time I approached the *pavillon*, it was raining so hard that I wished I knew how to find that sheltered short-cut. But it seemed best not to risk explorations in the darkness, so I went along the street side of the

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house as usual and around to the front door. I looked up and saw that the Wildes' room was unlighted. Inside, even the hall light had been turned out — that surprised me — and I had the feeling that everyone in the building was sound asleep. But as I climbed the first flight of stairs, I thought I heard the sound of someone, or something, moving at the back end of the house.

It seemed to me that there was a person there who was trying not to make a sound, and who was almost, but not quite, succeeding. At the head of the stairs I stopped and listened, but the slight noise had ceased. I walked down to the door that led into the older building, and stood still. There was no longer any sound of movement, but it seemed to me that I heard heavy, troubled breathing somewhere. I almost tried the door in the house wall, or the doors of the nearest bedrooms. But after all, I told myself, there was nothing alarming in these sounds — neither the actual suggestion of a marauder nor anything that might be taken as an appeal for help — and this was a hotel...

Besides, the maid Aurélie would have had plenty of time to come in by the back way from the kitchen, and these were just the kind of sounds that she would make if she were out of breath from hurry and trying not to disturb anyone — I did not realize, then, how thick those walls were! I decided that I should only make myself look foolish if I tried to butt in anywhere, and I went back along the hall and up the stairs toward my room. I am not afraid of burglars or of ghosts, but I do hate to look absurd! I felt more sure of myself when, as I passed Miss Hamilton's door on the way to my own, I heard the dog Fergus give a low growl. And I went to my room and went to sleep.

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But the next day I did go to the trouble of finding out that there had been no extra guest in the inn that night. And Miss Hamilton happened to mention that Aurèlie had complained of having been kept working in the kitchen until after midnight. I ended up by reminding myself that a stranger could not feel called upon to explain every sound he might think he heard in a hotel at night, especially if the hotel were an old and oddly planned building, as this one was.

And then the next day, on a morning which had dawned fresh and lovely after rain, as it often did at Neyronnes, the Frenchman Henri de Brassac came. And on the afternoon of the day after that, we welcomed the Sherrills. I never mentioned to anyone the sounds of the night. And in a few days I was ready to admit that I must have imagined them.

The arrival of the Sherrills was pleasantly dramatic. It was Friday, always a quiet day at Neyronnes, and I had taken a notion to have tea under the linden tree and had asked Miss Hamilton to join me. Miss Hamilton continued to be a good deal of a mystery to me, moving like a princess in her complete unconsciousness of her poverty-stricken appearance, and giving out so much information on the subject of everything and everybody except herself. I enjoyed talking with Miss Hamilton, and I had told myself that I wanted to talk with her further about Neyronnes — the history, or legend, of the grim towered structure, for example, that was known as the prison-house.

But as we sat down to our agreeable little English tea, I realized that the subject I truly wished to discuss was Christine Wilde. I had seen her very little, and thought about her a great deal. I was terribly puzzled

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and distressed about her. Not Miss Hamilton's own untold story, not the picturesqueness nor the past of Neyronne's, held my imagination as did this lovely caged bird of a girl...

'How long has Mrs. Wilde been an invalid?' I asked abruptly and without apology.

And somewhat to my surprise Miss Hamilton answered, 'I don't know.'

'I never saw the Wildes until eight weeks ago,' she went on. 'During the last two summers I have spent a good deal of time at Neyronnes, and just after I got here this spring Mrs. Wilde and her daughter came. Mrs. Wilde was very much upset about her financial losses, and then the fall of the dollar on top of that. She said the state of her health was such that she did not want to take the long journey to America, so she was looking for some place where she could live cheaply in France. It seems obvious, too, that she has lived so long in Europe that she has got out of touch with things in the United States, and she seems to have no friends or family there now. She is one of those passionately patriotic expatriates who is always bragging about her own country and hating the country she's in; but that,' Miss Hamilton commented, 'is just a type. One is always stubbing one's toe on them in France. Mrs. Wilde seems to have been in poor health for some years. So far as I have gathered, she is the widow of a naval officer. Christine, it seems, was taken out of school four years ago, when her father died — she was sixteen then — and she has been wandering about Europe with her mother ever since. They both speak four foreign languages fluently, and they are well acquainted with every fashionable health resort on the continent of Europe.

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They don't go to England, because they don't like the climate. Now, you see, they are economizing.'

'But Christine!' I ejaculated. 'How frightfully rough on her! The poor child seems ——'

I never got the words out, about what Christine seemed; and perhaps it was just as well. At that moment a small motor car came into the square, and a woman's voice cried out, above the gentle sound of the engine,

'But, John, this isn't *possible!*'

The car came to a standstill behind Miss Hamilton, and I could see what she could not — an exceedingly charming woman, dark-haired, youngish, and very much alive, who put her head out of the car window and looked about her, without moving, otherwise, at all.

'There is no such thing!' she cried, again. 'We're dreaming it!'

The Kerry blue terrier, who had been lying quietly, as usual, at Miss Hamilton's feet, jumped up, surprisingly, and made an almost puppyish dash toward the strange automobile. And,

'Why, here's a dog like Fergus!' the charming young woman said.

Miss Hamilton sprang from her chair, turned around, and flung herself toward the newcomers as rapturously as had Fergus himself. The young woman jumped out of the car. A man's voice cried,

'Hullo! Hullo! Hullo!'

'It *is* Margot!' the strange young woman exclaimed, and threw her arms around Miss Hamilton's neck.

'It *is* Elinor!' Miss Hamilton laughed, and there was a personal happiness in her lovely voice that I had not heard there before. 'How do you do, John?' she went on, and the man got out of the automobile and shook hands

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with her, less impulsively, but with a pleasure that was just as plain to see.

He was a tall, spare, dark-eyed man, who looked distinguished without looking conspicuous, and I was instantly glad to see him. And, from that first moment of their arrival, the Sherrills were good for us all.

It was good for Miss Hamilton to be with her old friends — friends of the days when she had not been shabby, when there had been no incongruity in her possession of a magnificent thoroughbred dog, when her hair had not begun to turn gray. It was good for me to have another English-speaking man to talk with. And it was the Sherrills who succeeded in providing Christine with a little holiday. What Mrs. Wilde would never have thought of granting to Christine's own request, what she would have refused to concede to Miss Hamilton's pleading or to my argument, she gave readily enough to the first suggestion from the well-known novelist John Sherrill and his exquisite wife: she let them take Christine with them to Tournus and Cluny.

But I am getting ahead of my story... What Mrs. Sherrill said next was that Neyronnes seemed incredible.

And Miss Hamilton answered, 'Why, of course, Elinor, that is what everyone says!'

Then I was introduced to the strangers, and the suitcases were dumped out on the cobbles, and Madame and Monsieur came out to greet their new guests, and the smart little coupé was driven into the garage. But when Madame asked if the newcomers wished to go to their rooms, Mrs. Sherrill, whose French was as perfect as Miss Hamilton's own, declared that she didn't want ever to leave the Place des Halles, and couldn't they just have tea?

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And Mr. Sherrill said, in English,

'We've engaged our rooms ahead, so why bother?'

So we all sat down together and fresh tea came, and we really had an awfully good time. Henri de Brassac strolled past us, coming up the steep path from the Lower Gate and the Promenade des Lices, but he did not speak to us, and I thought he looked bored at the sight of more Americans. The Sherrills explained that they had arrived on the *De Grasse* ten days ago, and had driven by easy stages to Neyronnes, where they intended to stay awhile.

'We had planned this summer in France and Italy, and when the country went off the gold standard we made up our minds to come anyway, and just stay put somewhere,' Elinor Sherrill said. 'John knew about Neyronnes, so here we are. Isn't it heavenly?'

She was younger than Miss Hamilton, and far, far more prosperous. Even in these last years of upheaval, life had been fairly easy for Elinor Sherrill, I guessed, where Margaret Hamilton had found it hard. But it was clear that these three Americans had come, originally, from the same stratum of American life: they were very different as individuals, but, as the saying is, they spoke the same language. And I was more pleased than I can say that they seemed to accept me as a real neighbor, almost as one of themselves. I wished that Christine might be having tea with us, away from her selfish, silly, impossible mother. But with that one cloud upon my contentment, I was well satisfied with our *partie carrée*.

And when the Sherrills met Christine, that evening, they liked her. And I could see almost at once that they were planning something that would give her a bit of a breathing-spell.

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Before they had it, however, I had an embarrassing experience. I was the unwilling auditor, that very evening, of a conversation which, later, I would have given anything I possessed not to have heard...

It was simple enough, the incident. I was making one of my evening prowls about Neyronnes, and I sat down, as often, on the grass below the drop of the ruined outer rampart, near the arch of the Lower Gate. The Promenade des Lices lay between the gate and the crumbling outer wall, and often of an evening young men and maidens walked about there, or sat and held each other's hands on the bench near the gate itself. Although I knew I couldn't be seen, I never moved or paid any attention when people passed by or stopped near where I was sitting. Even if they talked to each other, I couldn't understand a word they said.

So, that evening, I didn't feel troubled when I caught the approach of light footsteps in the *Lices* behind me, although the hour was a little advanced for the home-keeping folk of Neyronnes to be wandering about. And when I recognized the voices of the speakers, it was too late for me to move. They were sitting on the bench just behind me. I was sheltered only by a bit of vine-grown wall. If I had stood up, or even tried to crawl away, I should have been seen; and it seemed to me important that the speakers should not know that even the first sentence had been overheard. Better to stay where I was, I told myself, and hope that they would move away, or change the subject, soon.

'So, you see, clothes don't matter any more, Elinor,' Margaret Hamilton's beautiful voice sounded clearly in my ear. 'When one is quite desperate, as I am, one just keeps one's mind on essentials, and gets along as best one can from day to day.'

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'Oh, Margot, dear — *desperate!*' cried Mrs. Sherrill; and Miss Hamilton went on, evenly:

'That's what it seems to me. I have an annuity of seven hundred dollars a year. That is all there is left, except a very small amount of cash on hand from the sale of the last of my bonds, and that is going fast. Everything else is gone. I don't know where it went. I wish to Heaven I'd spent it. If I had wasted my substance on riotous living, I should have some extra-special fun to remember, presumably. But it's all just gone, swallowed up, disappeared. The bank says that in time a little may come back on some of it, but that doesn't seem to me to be a very practical hope — it isn't a hope that the bank is willing to take any risks on, certainly.

'And you see, Elinor,' Miss Hamilton added, 'when you are forty-five years old, and prematurely gray, and not very strong, and have no profession and no business experience of any sort, you can't exactly hope to get a remunerative job. I haven't any rich relations who will remember me in their wills, either,' she continued, speaking for the first time a little bitterly, 'much less help me now. I haven't even any home to go to. The good old days are gone. I'm just finished, done for, Elinor, unless something turns up; funny, how one finds oneself waiting for something to turn up — and of course nothing ever does. But — well, one gets along as best one can. What was it young Jolyon said — "To be kind and keep one's end up, what else is there?" That's the way I feel. And it does me a lot of good to see you and John, Elinor, dear. I hope you'll stay awhile.'

'I think we shall,' said Mrs. Sherrill. But she did not allow herself to be led away from the subject in hand.

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'Margot — I can't bear the thought of your "waiting for something to turn up." Isn't there anything we can do?'

'No, darling,' Miss Hamilton declared firmly, 'there isn't. I thank you with all my heart, Elinor. And I will promise you this: if I lose my seven hundred dollars a year and there is absolutely nothing between me and the bread-line, I'll come to you before I think of jumping into the river. But short of that, I'm not going to borrow money I could never pay back, and I'm not going to sponge on my friends, especially when they are hard hit themselves, as I know you and John are, though you are both such good sports you never say so. No, Elinor, theft or murder seems more self-respecting than that. And I've got to keep my self-respect,' she added. 'It's almost all I have left.'

'Self-respect and courage,' said Mrs. Sherrill softly. 'I think you have a good deal, Margot. But that won't feed or clothe you, worse luck. And, tell me, too — if you stay here month after month in a remote little place like this, doesn't the monotony and loneliness get on your nerves?'

'No, curiously enough, it really doesn't. I enjoy looking on, you know. There's a good deal to look on at even in a little place like this. And I love Neyronnes itself, and the walks I take; I never get tired of it, truly. So far, too, I've been able to get hold of a good many books — lucky I read French, isn't it? And, you know, Elinor, I've been pretty busy this last month just trying to be nice to that poor Mrs. Wilde and her daughter. I *am* sorry for her — for them both. One is glad to do what one can.'

'I suppose so.' Mrs. Sherrill was apparently not much

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interested in Mrs. Wilde. Then, to my surprise, she added, 'I like that American boy, the young teacher who's stranded here.'

'Yes, he's nice,' Miss Hamilton agreed pleasantly. 'Well, I certainly do hope that you and John will be able to endure our quiet life for a few weeks. *Courage, mes vieux...*'

'Courage' — Elinor Sherrill repeated the word in English.

> '"Courage is but a word; and yet, of words,
> The only sentinel of permanence..."

That is just you, Margot.'

'Thank you,' Miss Hamilton responded, 'but — "permanence": I'm not so sure, Elinor. What troubles me most about this — this turning upside down of all my world — is the effect it has on my mind and spirit, on the real *me*, you know.... I never thought of myself as dependent on money — I could get along on very little, I know, if I could just be fairly sure of firm ground under my feet. But this complete upheaval — it does queer things to me: it almost frightens me; sometimes I feel as if I understood the strangest depths of life, the strangest impulses. A sense of desperation seems to sweep away *everything*, somehow — not only material luxuries, material necessities, but one's sense of values, almost one's sense of right and wrong...' She broke off suddenly, and when she spoke again it was in a different tone. 'Thank you for quoting Galsworthy to me, and for believing in me, Elinor. That helps — you don't know how it helps. I keep saying that I won't be downed by material things — you give me courage to say it again...

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She had risen from the bench, and I heard their light steps fade away up the hill as they walked back toward the village. I sat still for a long time on the grass below the rampart, thinking that I ought to try to forget the personal revelations I had heard, and knowing that I never could — that I really did not want to. At that moment, I felt glad to have got a better understanding of Miss Hamilton.

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CHAPTER IV

I MEET HORACE BRAYE

The Sherrills asked Miss Hamilton to share a table with them in the *galerie*, and I was glad to see that they always had wine for luncheon and dinner, and that Mr. Sherrill always filled Miss Hamilton's glass. I drank the red wine of the country, myself, and it was only five francs a bottle. But Miss Hamilton had not been having wine, and I guessed that she liked it — that it was one of the amenities she had been used to. I had of course realized that Miss Hamilton had been accustomed to 'better days' — to far better days than I, for instance, had ever known. And for all her beautiful patrician dignity, I had guessed that she did not find poverty easy. As for the Sherrills, they had been forced to a new economy, too, and from being relatively rich they had now become relatively poor; but they never talked about it. The only person who talked about poverty was Mrs. Wilde.

In no conversation, however brief, did she neglect to mention the fact — or, I should say, the fiction — that she was 'broke.' And yet, that did not prevent her speaking scornfully of people who were actually poor. She even made a condescending reference, once or twice, to the Sherrills' little Chevrolet, although she was enough of an intellectual snob to treat the Sherrills with great respect as a rule. To me, she paid little attention; after her first affable greeting she seemed to have dismissed me as of no account; and after that short exchange of a few words at the garage door, her daughter and I had

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no personal conversation whatever. Yet the Sherrills, like Miss Hamilton, were always considerate to Mrs. Wilde and her invalidism, and it did sometimes happen that we all had coffee together in the *galerie*. That was what we were doing on Saturday evening, and the rest of us sat silent and peaceful while Mrs. Wilde prattled of herself and her misfortunes and her opinions and her poverty.

After an afternoon given over to many rural sight-seers, Neyronnes and its Place des Halles were quiet in the long evening twilight. And I, for one, was willing to let Mrs. Wilde talk on, so long as I might be allowed just to watch the scene before me. A woman drove a donkey-cart across the *Place*. Two little girls came in from one of the corner *ruelles* with a pot of milk between them, and carried it cautiously across the cobbles to one of the more beautiful of the mediæval houses on the other side of the square.

The big *Place* could be entered only at the corners: only one of these corner pathways was wide enough for a motor car, and only one other, the steep descent to the Lower Gate, would admit the passage of even a small donkey-cart. Peasants and villagers moved very slowly to and fro. And the whole scene, in the gently fading light, against the background of the noble old houses, was, as Mrs. Sherrill had said, 'incredible.' I even forgot to feel anxious about Christine Wilde: and I allowed myself to think that she, too, was enjoying this quiet immemorial pageant. To her mother, I simply was not listening; I think that no one was. Our peace was broken only by the arrival of a motor car. It was an enormous Lincoln, and it got around the corner and into the *Place* with some difficulty.

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John Sherrill groaned. 'Here,' he announced, 'comes another American family who crossed by the French Line.'

'With a car like that, they won't stay in Neyronnes,' his wife murmured comfortingly.

But Mrs. Wilde fairly shrieked in admiration. 'Why, Mr. Sherrill, you're just like Sherlock Holmes! How do you know?'

He chuckled. 'You do me too much honor, dear Madame Watson,' he said. 'I know they are Americans because they have the A.A.A. badge on their car. I know — or I guess — that they crossed on the French Line because they have the license letter and series number that the French Line gives you when you drive out of Havre. And I hope that Elinor is right and that they are too prosperous for Neyronnes. I don't like their looks.'

Neither did I. The car had stopped in front of the inn now, and we could plainly see the man and woman who were its only occupants. And when the man opened his mouth and spoke, we liked him still less.

But to say that he spoke is to make an under-statement. He was purple with anger and exhaustion, and he bellowed.

'God damn this place!' he roared. 'Why don't they tear down those good-for-nothing houses and make a decent road!'

'Oh, Horace,' wailed a timid voice from this person's companion, 'that would cost an awful lot of money. Don't you suppose they're just too poor?'

He was a bull-like individual, and this remark was a red rag. I jumped at once to the conclusion that remarks from his life's comrade often were.

'*Poor!*' he ejaculated. '*Poor!* The *French?* My God,

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you poor fish, the French are the only people on earth who have any money left, the bloodsuckers! And now that we've got to this God-forsaken place up this damned hill, I'll bet they'll hold us up for our last cent for a room with a bath, damn them...'

What with rage and fatigue, he snorted as he bellowed. But his speech, of which we could hear every word, affected his different listeners quite differently.

Margaret Hamilton gave an irrepressible little giggle and whispered, 'There isn't a room with a bath in the place, thank Heaven!'

Mrs. Wilde, on the other side of me, said, quite audibly, 'Oh, the poor man! What will they do?'

Mrs. Sherrill, Christine, and I all sat silent. But as Madame Delande appeared in the doorway and smiled her most gracious hospitality upon the newcomers, John Sherrill got up and walked very quickly to the car, from which the bull-like personage was now preparing to descend.

'How do you do?' he said, and his voice and manner were models of the most urbane affability. 'Monsieur Delande, who speaks English perfectly, happens to be away at this moment. May your fellow-countrymen welcome you?'

If the big man's rage had been funny, the complete and sudden transformation in his mood was funnier still. His wrath fell from him on the instant. From being tired and nervous and angry he became not only amiable, but definitely friendly, and positively content. His smile spread across his broad countenance with a joviality that was almost benign.

'Well, Heaven be praised!' he pealed forth his thanksgiving. 'Americans! We *are* in luck!'

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He did not even glance toward Madame his hostess, but addressed John Sherrill again: 'Nobody here who speaks English, eh? Well, I say, can you talk their silly lingo? Will you ask this dame how much she'll rob me of for a double room and a bath?' He turned toward the group of us in the *galerie* and winked broadly. 'She'll rob me all right. You can be sure of that. And how! Europe expects every American to pay double — how's that for a wisecrack?'

He was in high good-humor now. Miss Hamilton looked at him with the first expression of scorn and dislike that I had ever seen on her kind, plain face. But Mrs. Wilde laughed sympathetically, and called out, in a voice which she could make very sweet when, as now, she wanted to:

'It's a perfect shame, but there are no private baths in this hotel.'

'There are no double rooms free at this moment,' added Miss Hamilton; and her voice was not sweet.

John Sherrill spoke in a low tone to Madame, and turned back to the strangers.

'This is a simple country inn and it has no private baths,' he confirmed the bad news. 'And it happens that at present the double rooms with running water are all taken. Madame has a room with one large bed, for twenty francs. Or, if that won't do, there is another, smaller, room adjoining, which you can have, as well. The smaller room usually rents for fifteen francs; but since no double room is free, Madame will let you have the two single rooms for thirty francs, which is the price of one room with two beds.'

The man grunted. 'No bath,' he growled. 'My God, you'd have thought that all the Americans coming to

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