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MERYL

WILLIAM TILLINGHAST ELDRIDGE

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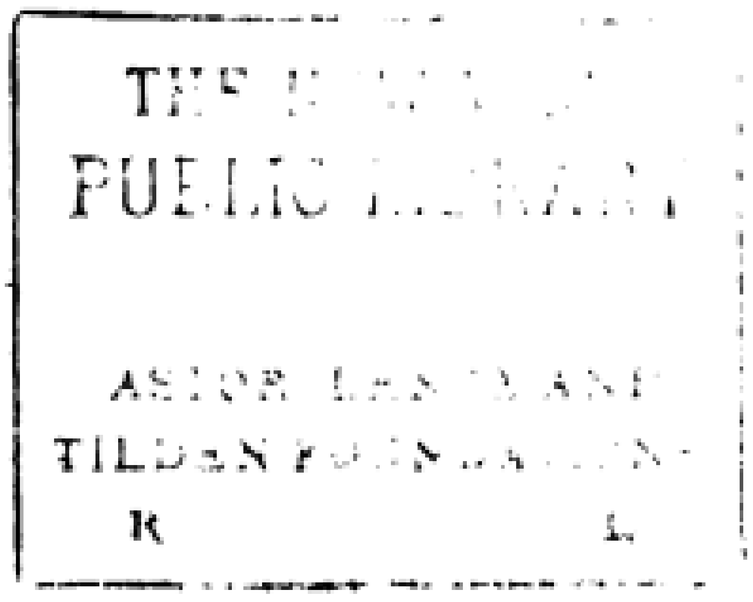

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" ' Please,' she cried, ' just let me draw a big deep breath and keep very, very still.' "—*Page* 173.

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MERYL

BY

WILLIAM TILLINGHAST ELDRIDGE

Author of "Hilma"

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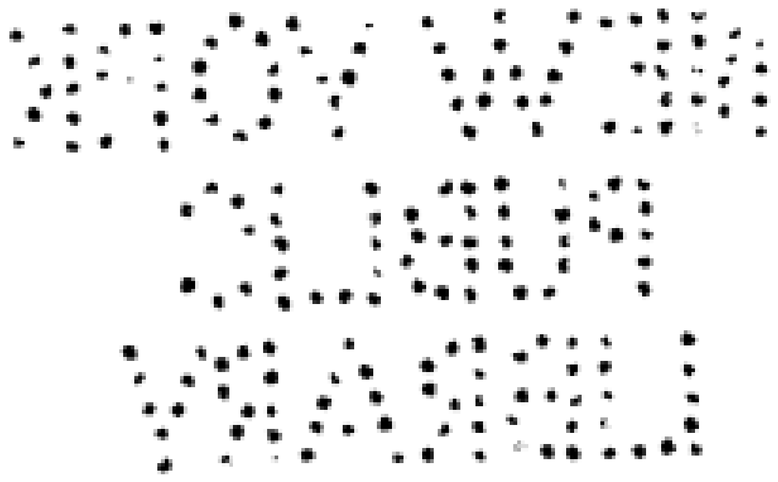

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To

MY WIFE

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"I would I were a painter, for the sake
Of a sweet picture, and of her who led
A fitting guide, with reverential tread
Into that mountain mystery. First a lake
Tinted with sunset; next the wavy lines
Of far receding hills; and yet more far,
Monadnock lifting from his night of pines
His rosy forehead to the evening star."

—WHITTIER

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CHAPTER I

A MISSING SERVANT

The little clubhouse, no more than a good big living room; a long open dining porch and kitchen beyond with sleeping rooms above, hung on the side of the hill among the trees and protruding rocks. There it nestled in its setting of primeval forest as a harbinger for him who would come to the pines and hemlock. Under its roof for the sake of the outdoor life, and now and then a fair catch of trout from a neighbouring brook, or a good string of bass from Winnepesaukee, whose island dotted surface could be seen below, spread out in all its grandeur, you might rest—either from the cares of a too mad winter's rush for wealth or the less meritorious drive for social aggrandisement.

Under the huge pines where the moss hung black-green upon the gray rocks, it looked cool and inviting, but down the slope to the right of the clubhouse, even so early in the morning, the sun fell on the open path and the heat radiated from the rocks and worn earth in zigzagging rays dazzling to the eye.

Far away over the trees—a long velvety stretch they were—one gazed out across where Winnepesaukee sparkled clear in the rising sun, the flash on its matchless blue a sure forecast of a hot day ahead.

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"Tom," came a loud call from one of the upper rooms; "chuck out an extra towel, will you?"

A dark curly head poked itself around the corner of the building—the smile under the kinky locks was broad and white—and then the general factotum of the Hanover Club moved slowly into the open space before the broad porch to gaze up at the window above.

"Dat yer, Mistah Hernal'? All right, sah. Heah's yer towel," and the negro dodged back toward the kitchen, returning with the desired article.

Down the outside steps of the building Bob Hernald bounded, his full six feet and broad shoulders garbed in blue pajamas, his feet in moccasins, while after him came muttered threats as less wide awake members protested against such early hours.

"Whew!" he exclaimed, coming to a stop beside the negro cook. "It's going to be a corker!" His gaze followed the still tree-tops to the waters beyond.

"It sure is," Tom agreed, holding out the towel. "'Tain't no day fo' fishin'."

"Reckon not," Bob agreed, tossing the towel over his arm. With a nod he was off on a run for the ravine below, where a fair-sized stream, lingering lazily in its rush to the lake, formed a deep pool.

Back again from his morning plunge, he realised as he came from out the shade of the woods that the day was going to be a record-breaker, and so at breakfast he protested against any fishing.

"It's too blamed hot," he argued, gazing toward the

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lake. "They won't bite, and besides, you'll frizzle out there."

"Right you are, Robert the Handsome!" Billy Dawson agreed from the far end of the table as he stretched lazily. "I'm going to hang out in a hammock, and pejams and a decent novel are all my attire."

A few dissented and the argument that followed as to the possibilities of the bass biting or no, and whether the chance of getting a good string was worth the exertion, waxed as warm as the day.

Frank Hemming for one was strong in his determination to go. Finally, as the dozen-odd men pushed their chairs back from the table contented inwardly, at least, with black coffee, bacon and eggs and real corn bread, Bob Hernald announced that he should run over to Wolfboro in his car.

"I've got a couple of tires coming up," he called out as the men scattered. "If any of you fellows are going fishing, get your traps and I'll take you down to the lake."

"I'm with you," Hemming agreed, "if you'll drop us at Black's."

"Black's or anywhere, only get going."

The cars were kept in a small building below the clubhouse, and soon a half dozen were piling into Bob Hernald's car, to be whirled off to Black's, where a launch could be found to take them to the fishing grounds.

Leaving his companions, Bob turned the car back

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toward the main road, with the shouted promise to be back in time to get them to the clubhouse for supper.

The wood road that leads down to Black's is narrow and rutted, and the car made slow progress along it. Once out of the ruts, however, it shot ahead and mile after mile flew by to the steady hum of the motor.

Here and there through the trees glimpses of the lake could be caught; the rippling waters looking cool and inviting, and withal tempting, yet falsely so, for the sun was beating down mercilessly in the open. The thick pines arched over the road, while a rain two days before had laid the dust.

Wolfboro, Bob Hernald's destination, was a good three hours' run from Black's around the lower bay, and it was well on to twelve o'clock when the low squatty station and clustering village came into view.

The bustle and life, after weeks in the great woods, seemed to have a certain fascination, and he settled himself easily in his seat as he drew up at the platform to watch the hurrying crowd that came flocking from the cars.

A glimpse of daintily dressed passengers caught his eye, and the spirit of civilisation seemed suddenly to stir within him, lured from its hiding place by the bustling station platform and receding train. A slow waltz seemed a positive reality.

His gaze turned from the car, as the majority of those who had alighted were hurrying toward the steam-

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boat landing below. Where before a bustling swarm had flocked and jostled, only one or two loungers and an old man and girl remained.

The girl caught his eye instantly. Dressed in a trim-fitting and positively appropriate brown frock, she made a picture to hold one's gaze. A broad low golden-brown hat covered the deep bronze hair drawn back low on the neck. She was tall—laughter seemed to lurk in her eyes—and the little heels beat a dainty, determined tattoo on the platform, seemingly to say she knew where and whereof she strode.

Out from under perfect brows her eyes fairly danced with life and pleasure. The station platform, the distant wharf all seemed to be considered in one quick glance, and the exclamation of pleasure as she turned to her companion brought a smile to Hernald's lips.

It was as if the world held much for her; that it was perhaps new and strange—at least, the view must be—for how else could one so fair find such pleasure in so prosaic a little village.

"It is beautiful," she whispered with a deep indrawn breath that set her bosom heaving. The voice was low and even, but with such a fulness that whispered of a perfect rippling laugh, that Bob stirred, his interest growing.

As her companion turned back to speak to the station agent the girl moved slowly down the platform. Then he noted she was older than he had first thought, older than her simple costume would indicate. As his eyes low-

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ered before her frank look of curiosity, he noted the foreign cut of her skirt and boots.

There was no mistaking her now, and yet, in her dress there was a smartness, he frankly admitted, far too good to be anything but American, to his way of thinking.

The steamer marks on the bags with which the man came hurrying back seemed to confirm the boots and dress.

"There must have been some mistake," he heard him say, "for the carriage is not here."

"What shall we do then?" the girl asked, and her eyes again turned to the lake.

"It should be here any minute, miss."

In the words Bob placed the man as a servant.

"Where shall we wait?" the girl questioned half absently.

Before a reply could be made, a barefoot boy hurried up the platform to the two and spoke quickly to the man.

"He says the carriage has broken down, miss," the servant explained, and then Bob, feeling his curiosity had led him too far toward eavesdropping, leaped down and hurried toward the station to enquire for the tires he was expecting.

The express office was closed for the noon hour, so he turned back, and as he reached his car noted the girl and her servant crossing the street towards the one hotel Wolfboro supported.

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Bob had suffered once at its hands, but, nevertheless, in this case was driven to its doors for lack of other accommodation, and so, with the dust and dirt of the ride removed, he presented himself at the wide doors of the dining-room, where a number of long, white-covered tables stretched down its matted floor, each as absolutely uninviting as the next. But at one of these—only two were prepared for the unfortunates—the girl he had noticed on the station platform was seated, and to a place directly across from her he was shown.

Then followed the meal—" dinner " in the vernacular of the town—with the major parts served in thick white bird bathtubs, assisting materially to the unpalatableness of it all.

During the coming and going of the dishes and the steady drone of the flies, he noted with some wonder the one opposite, whose evident embarrassment was marked by the colour mounting high on her cheeks.

As he glanced up once he caught a look from under quickly lifted eyelids that dropped again instantly, as if their owner had been perhaps over-bold, or wished so to appear. Yet again the high-held head, the mass of brilliant hair coiled low on the neck, and the deep brown eyes, seemed to be all of one with whom the downcast glances and marked shyness, were strangely out of place.

His appetite finally half appeased, he fled from the uninviting dining room with the intention of a return to the station for another search for his tires. Then the

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distant click of the billiard balls drew him down a side hall, and before long he was busy in a game at which his skill aroused the deepest admiration of the village loungers.

It was close on to three o'clock before he recalled he had need to hurry, if he was to get back to Black's in time.

Down the hall he rushed, pulling on his coat as he went, to be stopped suddenly as a side door was flung open in his face. The girl he had noticed on the platform stood hesitatingly before him.

"I beg your pardon," she faltered, as he stopped. "I thought it was——"

He raised his cap and waited, for on her face there was not only a look of quick embarrassment, but an added one of anxiety not there before.

"Is there anything I——" and then stopped, feeling as if he could be accused of taking advantage of her mistake, when he should have passed on.

A look almost of relief flew to her eyes at the mere suggestion in his words.

"If you would—but——" and again he hesitated.

"If there is anything I can do?" he urged. There was no doubt in his mind that something was amiss. The soft foreign accent as the girl spoke seemed almost to say she was a stranger in a strange land, and his desire to be of service quickened as she stood there before him, hesitating, embarrassed, but withal more beautiful for the high colour on her perfect cheek. Out

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from such a face, framed with glorious bronze hair, her eyes of hidden depths looked appealingly.

"You were at the station, were you not?" she asked, the colour deepening in her face even as she put the question. "Yes, I thought I recognised you," she went on as he nodded agreement, "and so perhaps—did you notice a man with me?"

"Your servant?" Bob suggested.

"Yes, Kendon," the girl cried eagerly. "Do you know him?"

"Why no," he shook his head slowly, puzzled by the question. "I simply heard him address you, and so I judged he was your servant."

"Yes, I see," the girl faltered, and the eagerness in her voice died down suddenly as she turned away.

"Can I—that is, let me do something?" he pleaded. "You are perhaps a stranger here, and if there is anything I can do——"

"No." She turned again, speaking slowly; as if hardly noting him at all. "No, I can only wait—but it does seem——" and suddenly she glanced up and over her face a troubled little smile, half plaintive, half doubtful, flashed—"it is a long time, isn't it—and I don't see why he hasn't come."

"Have you been waiting here ever since dinner?" he exclaimed in startled surprise, suddenly recalling that he had spent a good two hours over the pool table.

"It is a long while, isn't it? But perhaps——" Her face brightened again and the deep brown eyes flashed

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almost merrily—" the stable is a long way from here. He went to get a carriage."

For a moment Bob studied the girl before him with perplexity.

" Do you mean," he demanded, as the facts suddenly dawned upon him, " that your servant left you here to get a carriage, and hasn't returned for you yet? "

" Yes," the face lighted and the deep brown eyes rested on him as the head lifted with a little toss of the chin. " Our carriage had broken down and he went to see about it or to get another."

" I see," he nodded slowly, recalling the bare-footed boy at the station. " Do you happen to know where your servant went to get the carriage? "

" He didn't say. But wait! " and one little finger was pressed against the red lips, which pouted in perplexity. " Kendon said—yes, he said he would go down the road to where our carriage was broken down—a boy brought us word it was broken down while we were at the station —and if he found it couldn't be fixed, he would come back and hire one. You see, we have quite a distance to go from here."

" Oh, I see," he drew a deep breath. " Most likely the carriage was much further away than he expected. He ought to be back at any moment."

" Yes, I suppose so." The merriment went out of the voice suddenly at the thought of waiting longer.

" If you would like me to look? " he suggested, moved by the tone. " He went down the road? "

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"The boy said it was down the road. But—why you shouldn't bother. I am sure he'll be back quickly."

"So am I," he agreed with a reassuring smile, "but I'll run down the road a way and hurry him along. I've got my car right here," he explained as the girl was about to interpose objections, "and it won't take me but a moment. I'll tell him—what's his name?"

"Kendon."

"I'll tell him," he added with a merry smile and a nod of assurance, "that you don't like New Hampshire hotels well enough to wait in them for nearly three hours at a stretch. I'll get him quickly," and with another nod he was off down the hall.

Yet for all his assurance he was sorely puzzled, not simply at the absence of the servant, which hardly seemed explained by the broken-down carriage, but also by the manner of the one he had just left.

She was twenty-three at least, of that he was certain, and yet there was a shyness, a quick coming and going of colour in her face, an equally quick lifting and lowering of eyelids that might be expected in one of half her years, or, perish the thought—in a skilled diplomat in the art of false simplicity. But the anxiety her eyes betrayed—that puzzled him—while to add to the charm there was her beauty. As he drove the car on he could clearly picture her face framed in its masses of dark hair. He would lend what aid he could; he would know more of one so strangely met.

Past the station he sent the car and on down the lake

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road that led straight from Wolfboro to Melvin, a good twelve miles beyond. Mile after mile flew by, and then suddenly he slowed down the car and looked about him. There had been no road branching off, and still he had covered eight miles without meeting any broken-down carriage; in fact, any carriage at all.

Could it be the servant had gone some other way? For a moment he hesitated, and then quickly swinging the car about started back toward the village.

At every farmhouse he stopped to make enquiries, but without avail.

Then at the foot of a short hill near the village a small unpainted house loomed up, and he slowed down there the put the same enquiry. A barefooted youngster hurried around the corner of the building as the car came to a stop.

"Have you seen a broken-down carriage?" Bob demanded, gazing down into the dirt-besmirched face which scrutinised him in honest admiration. It was something to be talked to by a man who ran an automobile.

"The one I told the man about?" the boy demanded eagerly.

"The one you—oh yes, it was you," Bob agreed with a nod of recollection. "You did bring the word, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir," the youngster dug his bare toe into the mud. "I fetched it, and the man went down there a long time ago." The boy pointed along the road.

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"Went down there?" Bod demanded. "Are you sure?"

"Oh, yes, sir, fer he come along with me. He went down the rud and I'd 'a' gone with him only ma called me in."

"I see," Bob smiled. "So he was walking. Well now, how far down the road was the carriage?"

"I dunno."

"Don't know! I thought you said you told him it was only down the road a bit?"

"The other man told me that."

"The other man!" he turned in his seat. "What other man?"

"The feller that got me to go to the station. He told me to tell the man the carriage was broke, and then he slipped a *quarter* into my hand," and the boy produced the coin with a careful glance over his shoulder towards the house.

"I see," Bob agreed, studying the boy intently while strange thoughts hurried through his head. "And where did the man go?"

"I don't know. He jest told me to tell the other man that, and I done it."

"Of course," Bob nodded cheerily, "and you haven't seen the man you told about the carriage since he went down the road?"

"No, sir." The boy slowly shook his head.

To make sure, he swung the car about and

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retraced the eight miles or so that he had covered before. It seemed a waste of time, and yet there was the boy's story, so somewhere down the road beyond the unpainted house Kendon must have gone.

Nowhere on the road were there any signs of an accident, and at the first farmhouse beyond where he had talked with the boy no one recalled seeing a man that answered Kendon's description.

Slowly he shook his head at the puzzle, while as the car raced back toward the village, the strangeness of the servant's actions faded before the thought of the girl waiting for him in the dingy hotel parlour.

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CHAPTER II

MERYL SEWELL

With a rush he turned the car into the curb before the hotel and hurried up the steps.

"I've missed him somewhere on the road," he explained as the girl met him at the parlour door.

"You haven't found him!" she exclaimed, her disappointment showing plainly. "Oh, what am I to do?"

"But it's not so bad," he urged. "Something has happened that we can't understand, that's all. I can get you a carriage."

"But," she faltered, "I don't know where to go."

"Don't know where to go!" he stopped in doubt.

"No. You see," the girl hurried on as if eager to confide in someone. "Kendon knew, and he was taking me to my uncle."

"Yes, I see," Bob nodded, studying the face carefully and very certain he did not understand. "But you have some idea, haven't you? Your uncle lives near here, I suppose—that is, he must. Perhaps I know him," and then as he was about to ask for the same, he remembered he had not mentioned his own. Introducing himself, he explained quickly that he was stopping at the Hanover Club and how he came to be in Wolfboro.

"Can't I help?" he urged, "or perhaps you will wait until your servant returns?"

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"But how can I?"

"But you don't know where you are going."

And then of a sudden the girl burst into a merry peal of laughter.

"Do come, Mr. Hernald, and please sit down while I explain. I must talk. You see, it's all so strange, and perhaps you'll listen."

"Gladly," he agreed, welcoming the opportunity to learn more of the one before him.

They found chairs in the dingy parlour, and for an instant the girl hesitated, as if undecided just how to begin. Her brown skirt was drawn tightly over her knees, her elbows on them, her chin rested in her hands. Then she glanced up half shyly and again the rarest smile in the world played across her lips.

"I've lived in Ireland—in a convent—all my life," she began, with sudden directness, "and my name is Meryl Sewell——"

"Sewell," he broke in with a start. "Is your uncle Gale Sewell of Wilderness Lodge?"

"Wilderness Lodge!" Meryl Sewell questioned. "Yes! Yes! That is it. That is what Kendon called it. So *you* know my uncle?"

"Why, of course," he agreed eagerly, as he moved forward. "He's a crazy old—I beg your pardon—he's an eccentric old gentleman. He has a place up on the Ossipees; calls it Wilderness Lodge. You are going there?"

"I was going to my uncle's."

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"That's it. Why, Jack Marsden's place is there too," he hurried on. "Marsden's a great friend of mine, and I've met your uncle several times. He's got two thousand odd acres over that way. Marsden's got a strip beyond, and this way is the Hanover Club."

"I see," Meryl agreed, clapping her hands softly as she moved forward eagerly in her chair, her face brightening suddenly as she seemed to come upon one who knew all about her.

"And you were going there, of course, when Kendon got lost. But look!" He rushed on excitedly. "Why not let me take you there? It's only a bit beyond the Club, and I'm going over there this afternoon."

"But Kendon?"

"Oh, I'll leave word here for him. If he turns up he can follow. What's the use of waiting any longer," he argued gaily, feeling that the long ride back would have an added charm if only he could have this girl as a companion.

"But should I?" Meryl questioned.

"Why not—but, of course, it is odd. Yet what else can we do?" It seemed perfectly natural for him to couple their acts together. "You don't really know me, of course."

"Oh, no, I didn't mean that, Mr. Hernald," she cried, her face flushing a deep crimson and her little hand flying out in a gesture of protest.

"But you don't," he insisted; "yet if you'll go with me I'll be awfully glad to take you."

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"But perhaps this Mr. Sewell isn't my uncle," she suggested.

"That's so," he agreed. "Yet he must be. You said the place was called Wilderness Lodge."

"Yes," she admitted, "but Kendon! I can't leave him."

"I'll write a note,"—he proposed letting no such small matter interfere—"and leave it here. When he turns up he can follow."

"That might do," she agreed.

"Do! of course it would," he urged. "You just want to get to your uncle's."

"Yes," she nodded, the colour deep in the perfect cheeks, "if you will—unless I'm troubling you. Perhaps you have some other place to go."

But he laughed gaily.

"I'm the most care-free body in this world," he announced. "Come! We'll wait no longer. I'll scribble a note to your servant. He left you here, and so, of course, he'll come back here to find you."

"But, where can he be?" she questioned falteringly.

"That's beyond me," Bob laughed gaily, "but we won't wait." And without more ado he seized upon her luggage and carried it pell-mell to the street.

He helped her to a seat at his side, and with a touch life was in the car.

One stop was made at the station, to secure the tires he had come for, and then the long straight lake road was before them, Wolfboro behind.

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"Your uncle's place is over there." He pointed as the road led by close to the edge of the lake.

Far across the wide expanse of the island-dotted waters could be seen on the farther side the rising hills of the Ossipees.

"We go around the lower bay," he explained. "On the first hill, where you see the bare spot cropping out, is the Hanover Club. Beyond is Wilderness Lodge."

"It is delicious," she murmured, "and the lake—I never saw anything half as grand."

"Winnepesaukee is a great old sheet of water," he agreed; "yet there are lots on the other side just as fine."

"I saw the Mediterranean, once," she replied.

The emphasis on the "once" made him glance around.

"Yes," he agreed, "it's a great deal bluer than Winnepesaukee."

"But this is more beautiful. The woods all about it and the islands—it seems like a fairyland."

"You should see one of our sunsets," he urged, "then the lake's perfect. When there's never a ripple on the water; when the depths take on the myriad colour of the sky and everything is as still as death. To go floating out in a canoe at such a time, just as the sun is sinking away, then it's at its best."

"And to where do you go floating, Mr. Hernald?"

He glanced at her quickly, as if to catch the real meaning in the speech.

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"Oh, to an endless contentment," smiling gaily. "You float away and all your cares are gone, while your prospects are as rosy-tinged as the sky itself."

"I think that is how I have been floating," she spoke softly.

"And now you've come to America, to float on as happily in a new setting, that is all," he suggested.

"Perhaps," she admitted, and added: "But the introduction was not auspicious. One couldn't float serenely in that little hotel."

"It was a discord, truly," he nodded, "but not a lasting one."

"Thanks to you. Ah, but this is so different, after all," she hurried on. "You know, Mr. Hernald, I've lived all my life in a little convent. I've never been anywhere"—she turned to him and their eyes met—"except once, until now."

"You truly have had a floating time, and on quite placid waters," he agreed, longing to ask a dozen questions.

"Why, I never knew there really was a world like this. Of course, I've read—oh, such a terrible lot,"—the little pout at the thought of books and studies was a merry one,—"but when one only reads one can know but little."

"Of the world," he admitted.

"I was always kept in the convent. You see, I never had a father or mother at all. I just remember the gray buildings and the gardens, all surrounded by a

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high stone wall. Then there were the Sisters, and that was all."

"For all your life?"

She drew herself up very straight and the side glance from her brown eyes had a merry, laughing, tantalising twinkle in them. "For my whole twenty-three years. See the gray hairs of piety?"

They both joined in the laugh, and the car swung around the curve and on into the deep shadow of close growing pines.

"Oh, how delicious!" she cried as the cool pine needle odour greeted her nostrils.

"The world has virtue, you see," he answered.

She nodded. "I think the world is really worth trying. When Kendon came for me and told me that I was to come to America, to my uncle's,—and I never knew I had an uncle before,—I didn't really think so at first, but now, when I've had a taste of it, I'm beginning to believe I've wasted my time."

He turned and looked at his companion curiously.

"Do you mean to tell me you've never been anywhere, that you——" But he stopped. She had, of course, said as much, but it seemed impossible to believe.

She nodded sagely. "Nowhere; but once, for my health, to Italy."

"But——" and then he stopped again. Someway, he who had travelled the world over, couldn't believe it.

"How could I?" She turned to him again. "I've

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lived all my life in the convent, and when I wanted to go out anywhere, the Sisters wouldn't let me."

"Wouldn't let you?"

"They said I must not. I tried to rebel at first, but it was no use. They told me once that I was to live with them forever."

"And become a Sister?" he demanded, the horror in such an idea slipping into his tone.

"No, they said I couldn't do that—why, I don't know. I think, though, my father left me with the Sisters before he died, and it must have been he who arranged that I was to stay there always. Then my uncle found out about it and he sent for me."

Bob nodded absently. His thoughts turned suddenly to the contrast between Gale Sewall, old and eccentric, living in the mountains of New Hampshire practically the life of a hermit, and this girl, an absolute stranger to the world and its ways. To such a man she was going. Was it but the exchange of one prison for another? Gale Sewell never went anywhere,—unless to trail his brook for trout,—and hardly a soul came to Wilderness Lodge except the Marsdens.

And then the thought—he was a friend of Jack Marsden's, and if the monotony of her life in such a place could be lightened, he resolved to lend a hand.

As they reached the turn off toward Black's Landing, Bob suddenly recalled his friends.

Quickly explaining to his companion, he turned the car into the woods.

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The waiting men heard it coming, and a wild shout of derision at his lateness greeted his ear as he swung into the clearing about the wharf.

Then the loud voices and calls stopped suddenly at the sight of the girl by his side.

"You can wait here," he suggested, when he had explained matters, "or there's old man Black, he can take you back."

"How long shall you be?" one questioned.

"To Wilderness Lodge!" came the exclamation from another, so loud that the girl could not help catching the words, "up that hill? Why, he won't be back for an hour."

But at last it was arranged they should wait, and so the crest-fallen group was left on the wharf.

"Always Bob Hernald's way," one declared. "A good-looking girl anywhere on earth that needs help, and he tumbles onto her in some way. Luck! Why, I can remember——" And as the others lighted up, Dick Burden proceeded to spin an account of one of Bob Hernald's many exploits.

The car reached the main road again and under the trees the long shadows were growing black. On it went at full speed, for before them the road led ahead a long, straight grade toward the mountains. The lake was to their left, and at another turn in the road behind them.

"I fear I should have waited at the hotel," she suggested in a pleading voice.

"We'll be there before long," he assured her. "The

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road's a bit steep from here on, and rougher, too, yet we can make pretty good time. Certainly your uncle will be expecting you, so there'll be a bite waiting. The air does give one an appetite, doesn't it?"

"Yes," she agreed, "but your friends. They will be nearly starved by the time you get back."

"Do them good," he laughed, though he had failed to turn her thoughts from the over-loud protests of the men, which she could not have helped hearing.

"How much farther is it?"

"Oh, not a great way," he laughed. "You see, I can go back a-humming. The sand won't bother the car coming down."

With all his reasoning, he realised from the sudden silence that fell upon her, that he had not swept away the fears of having put him to some inconvenience. He wished then that he had not stopped at Black's at all.

On up the hill they climbed, and then the long mountain road fairly good, except for a stretch of sand now and then, was before them. Once they stopped to light the lamps, and so, with the four shafts of light marking the road ahead, they went on.

For a while the girl watched silently the dark pines spring into life as the long shafts of light from the lamps fell on them. It seemed like a ghostly picture—now bright, now black—touch and go.

"Oh," she exclaimed, "it's like a fairyland where the light falls!"

"It is!" he nodded gaily.

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"Oh, I do hope," she exclaimed suddenly, "my uncle won't be sorry he sent for me."

"Sorry!" he cried with fine disdain for such a thought, and then the distant sound of an approaching car fell on his ears, and with a wild shriek from the siren he slowed down.

Around a curve in the road, perhaps a hundred yards ahead of them, a car swept and came on in a rush.

"Why, it's Marsden's car!" he exclaimed, and at the same moment an exclamation from one of its occupants was heard, while with grinding brakes it came to a stop.

"Hello! Who's that? Is that Miss Sewell you've got there?" came the call.

He stopped his car as about to turn out into the road again.

"Yes, what's wanted?"

No answer came to the question, but instead, one of the men jumped down and came toward them. In the darkness his face could not be seen.

When within a dozen feet he stopped.

"Is that Miss Sewell?" came the question again.

"Yes," he called. "What's wanted? Is that Marsden's car?"

"Marsden's car? No," came the sharp answer. "We're after Miss Sewell. Her uncle sent us."

With a word to his companion he swung to the ground and walked to where the man waited.

"My name's Hernald," he began, and then in a word he explained matters.

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"I see," the other agreed. "Her servant's all right." Then he lowered his voice. "He's got drunk. Someone just 'phoned up from Wolfboro that he was in a bad way. Mr. Sewell sent us down at once."

"I see," he nodded.

"We're obliged to you, Mr. Hernald," the man added. "Now we'll just take Miss Sewell's luggage, and the lady, too."

"I can take her on. It's not much farther."

He turned back to where Meryl waited, but before he could explain matters, she spoke.

"I had better go with them. Your friends are waiting for you, you know."

"But it's only a step farther," he urged, not wishing to be cheated out of even the short distance left.

But she insisted upon the change, urging his waiting friends, and so, with as good grace as possible, he helped transfer her bags to the other car.

Then it turned and came up the road, and past his car some twenty feet before it stopped.

He helped her down, and as the man who had done the talking was standing close at hand, he turned to say good-bye at once.

Her face lighted at his suggestion that he might be passing Wilderness Lodge in a day or so.

"Oh, do!" she exclaimed, "and then my uncle can thank you as well as I."

He held out his hand and she took it quickly.

"I'll come," he laughed. "I'll come for the thanks."

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He watched the man help her into the tonneau of the other car, and she turned to wave her hand to him. Then the man who had spoken before turned and hurried back.

"I'm Mr. Sewell's secretary," he explained, "and I couldn't help overhearing what you said."

"Well?" he questioned, eyeing the tall, well-built figure before him rather doubtfully.

"Well, Miss Sewell has"—the voice lowered—"has lived a strange life for one of her age, and she comes here to her uncle under peculiar circumstances."

"Well?" he questioned.

"Mr. Sewell is an odd man, and, of course, he'd be glad to see you personally, to thank you for what you've done, but from what I know I rather think the young lady will be kept very quiet, and——"

"And callers will not be wanted," he finished for the other. "Thanks. Give my compliments to Mr. Sewell. I can take a hint. Good-night!"

In the glare of the lamps from his car a pleading face with just a sudden touch of loneliness in the eyes watched him swing quickly to his seat.

He was the first man she had ever seen or talked to for any length of time in all her life, and he had been very, very kind.

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CHAPTER III

THE DESERTED BUNK HOUSE

Two days went by, and Bob Hernald debated many times as to whether he should obey the injunctions of Gale Sewell's secretary or his natural inclinations.

He could be bold enough if the occasion demanded, but, nevertheless, there was a certain shrinking from embarrassing situations in his make-up, and so he hesitated. If he should present himself at Wilderness Lodge and find Gale Sewell coolly hospitable, and his niece nowhere in evidence, he would wish he had never gone. Yet, again and again came the picture of the tall girl in brown, the dark eyes that glanced up so innocently—the mass of gleaming bronze hair that formed a frame for a face chiselled clear as a die,—and he held back with difficulty.

He had been of some slight assistance to her when in distress, and surely, he argued, it would not be so very unbecoming to "drop in" to find how she fared now that she was safely housed.

Too, while fishing was a pleasant pastime, it became monotonous after a while, and the opportunity of a few hours now and then with his late companion seemed a pleasant prospect, not only to contemplate, but to actually enjoy.

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Yet he did nothing for two days, and to one of his inclinations two days was a long time. It was quick action with him, as his friends could attest. When he paid court, and his court was never—or at least, had never been so far—more than the deepest momentary attention, he preferred to shower bonbons one day, flowers the next, a drive, luncheon, more bonbons, the theatre and, possibly some rainy afternoon, a browsy hour or two over a book of poems, for Bob Hernald was a bit of a reader and dreamer for all his sporting and outdoor inclinations.

Yet in this instance he waited, hoping inwardly that Jack Marsden would turn up,—though he knew he wouldn't,—for he could give him all the facts necessary in regard to Wilderness Lodge and its owner. But Jack was in England, somewhere, and so that quarter seemed hopeless.

Gale Sewell he had met twice on the upper end of Rock Creek, a fairly famous trout brook, and the second time the owner of Wilderness Lodge, accredited with all manner of peculiarities, had been good enough to remember the first introduction without a second.

Yet, weighing all sides of the question, he still hesitated and even on the third morning—when he had resolved the night before to set out at dawn for Wilderness Lodge—he weakened.

Instead, he joined a half dozen of the other men for a day's tramp up to Ball Peak, a bare spot of out-cropping rock on the face of one of the Ossipees.

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They made a day of it, taking their time going up and a long rest in the late afternoon on the very edge of Ball Peak itself.

"Well, Robert," one of the crowd inquired as he lay stretched full length in the sun, his short, black briar burning furiously, "you've done pretty well, these last few days."

"But the germ's stirring," Dawson put in, catching the drift of the other's remark. "It's stirring! Bob will be off for his lady's castle pretty soon."

"Hasn't rushed in as quickly as I expected," Brooks laughingly added his gibe, "or have you sent down for some bon bons and a few dozen American Beauties?"

"I think, Bob," came the added advice from another lazy mortal, "that you should really go and dress up. Goggles aren't awfully becoming, even to you. And that flannel shirt—well, you look too much like a Wild West hero. Go get some glad rags on and toot over for the lady's inspection. You're too handsome to let your light shine under camp garb."

Bob turned his eyes lazily on the speaker and puffed easily on his pipe.

"Now don't you do it, Robert," Dawson advised. "A flannel shirt becomes you. Your hair's just a bit wavy, so it always looks in place. Those dark eyes, set in that ideal tan you've acquired—with your breadth of shoulders——"

"Anything more you fellows care to sling out?" the

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object of all this interrupted with a laugh. "But go on, and when I do go to call on the lady I'll take no one with me."

A chorus of protests greeted the threat, and Frank Hemming shied a pine cone at Bob's broad back. "You're too good-natured. Why in hell don't you get fussed up a bit?"

"I might, if you knew how to do it." Bob laughed as he rose slowly to his feet and stretched himself like a lazy, good-natured beast. "Come on now and let's get going, or we'll be late to camp. It's nearly as bad going down as coming up."

"Yes, and it wouldn't do to be late for supper, would it?" Brooks demanded, thinking of his long wait at Black's three nights before.

"Not unless you've got a right good excuse, and that none of you fellows seems able to produce."

"I haven't any tires to chase," Dawson suggested, as he rose laboriously to his feet.

They made their way back, down the side of the mountain, at times half sliding along the steep slope of the path, at others picking their way carefully by the edges of sheer ravines where a mere slip would have given them a bad fall, if nothing more.

All about them the woods were deep and dense, the underbrush growing so close between the tall, straight pines that except along the path progress was nigh impossible.

Far below them the long broken stretches of the lake

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lay like silver mirrors, while the stillness of the forest gave back their answering calls and shouts.

"Is it better than waiting for clients in a Broadway skyscraper, Bob?" Dawson demanded, as they came to a pause where the trees had been cleared away for a few hundred feet.

The one addressed nodded absently.

"Y-e-s." Another nod and a deep indrawn breath, as if his thoughts were far away. "Yes, though," turning with a laugh, "I never really tried it."

"No, I know you didn't," Dawson agreed. "You should have, though."

"I sometimes think you're right. Why the devil doesn't a fellow get in and dig, even if he doesn't have to? Now I've got *an office*, and you fellows use it for a quiet little game more than I do for clients. Why?"

Dawson's only answer was a laugh, as he turned away to join the others. He was in no mood to let his mind run to the settlement of such problems; in fact, his question had no underlying motive, not even mere curiosity.

Not so with Bob Hernald. The question of his willingness to go on without a set purpose often disturbed him, and it needed no more than the merest suggestion to stir his mind to a certain dissatisfaction with himself.

So he stood on the very edge of the path. Below, the ground fell away, and out over the swaying tree tops he looked to where a good three miles beyond the waters sparkled clear in the sun. A tiny speck of a

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boat could be made out, moving across an upper arm of the lake.

Far to the right, the nearest stretch of the lake ended in Green's Basin. Straight ahead was Long Island, and then the Broads, while on the further side lay Weirs, and far down the lake to the left was Wolfboro.

Finally he turned from his silent scrutiny of the picture to find that his companions were making down from the clearing, following a steep path that led straight toward the water.

"Hold on!" he called. "You don't want to go that way. Take the upper path and follow along the ridge."

"This is as good as the other," came the answer.

Frank Hemming paused, being the last one.

"Let's take the other path, Frank," Bob suggested. "We'll beat them in."

Hemming turned and called to the men now well below them and out of sight.

"Go ahead then your own way!" came back the answer.

"Let them go," Bob nodded, half glad to be rid of the crowd and their banter, which suddenly seemed ill-fitting to the great stillness of the woods.

"The upper path it is," Frank agreed, and the two made across the clearing.

For a while they tramped on silently, Frank in the lead. Two clearings similar to the one where they had parted from the others were passed, and then they

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turned from the road they had been following, and, taking a path that led off to the right, began gradually to work down the mountain side.

Another clearing was passed and then they entered a more open stretch where the high mountain blueberry bushes grew in rich profusion. A few bushes bore ripe fruit, and the two loafed along, picking handfuls as they went.

Suddenly both glanced up as a loud call came echoing through the woods.

"Did you hear that?" Frank demanded. He was standing listening.

"What was it?"

Before Hemming could answer, the cry was borne to their ears again. Loud, long, agonising.

"Come on!" Frank called, and with a bound raced through the rank growing bush and over the hidden rocks toward the path.

The cry had come from somewhere before them, and Bob leaped toward the path and in a minute was following his friend along it toward the woods ahead.

Again the cry rang out, and it was unmistakably that of a man, and one in great agony or danger.

The two had reached the wood, and raced on through the thick-growing pines for a hundred yards or so, when again the cry came, now more to the left and up the mountain side.

"Wait!" Bob called, and as he caught up with his friend he set up a loud "halloo"!

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Again came the cry, but this time it was cut short, as if the one uttering it had been suddenly silenced.

"It can't be any of the fellows?" Frank suggested.

Bob shook his head, and with a spring dodged through the pines and up the mountain side, with his friend close behind him.

The wood-road was above them, and Bob Hernald's first thought had been that some picnicking party, or perhaps a crowd mountain climbing, had met with a mishap.

It was rough going up the hill, but finally they came out in the wood-road, both spent in breath.

"To the right," he nodded, as they paused.

"What's wrong?" Frank yelled, using his hands as a trumpet.

No answer came to the hail, and again he called.

"It must be this way," Bob panted, and the two set off on a run down the road which turned and twisted among the trees and at times was so rank with brush and young saplings that it was difficult to find one's way. At last, spent with their running, they paused again.

"What the devil can it mean?" Frank exclaimed as they slowed down to a walk.

The woods were still as death about them.

"It was certainly someone, and badly hurt, I should say."

"A man's voice, too," Hemming agreed. "But why

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doesn't he answer or call again? He might be anywhere."

"We may have caught the echo," Bob suggested. "We were just below the sharp rise in the hill and he may be back of us."

They stood debating an instant, and then, as they were about to turn back, the cry rang out, more full of agony and pain than before, as if the owner was in mortal danger. It came from the right down the road, and so close at hand that the two started at its proximity before they sprung ahead on the run.

A dozen yards and the road turned sharply to the left, and the next instant they were in a clearing. On the further side stood an old tumbled-down shanty such as is used by the timber gangs when working on the mountain side.

The sight of a building so far up the mountain came as a surprise, and the two hesitated an instant. Then, with a shout of encouragement, they raced towards it. They reached the half-hung door, and Bob Hernald, who was in the lead, seized the hasp. But the door held.

"It's locked!" he exclaimed, and he stepped back suddenly.

"Halloa there!" Frank called. "What's wrong? Someone hurt? Halloa!"

No answer, and the two stood undecided.

Then as they glanced about in bewilderment, Hemming seized the other by the arm and pointed to the far end of the building.

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"That shutter moved," he whispered, lowering his voice in suspicion. "See!" His grip on his friend's arm tightened. "Someone's there—they looked out."

"Are you sure?" Bob questioned, his eyes watching the window intently. It was only a square opening, two feet in size, and was covered by a wooden slide on the inside. Perhaps a dozen similar openings, each closed by a solid wooden shutter, appeared in the long side of the building.

"It's closed now," Frank answered. "What the devil's doing?"

For answer, Bob walked across to the door and beat a heavy tattoo on it with a stout stick he had seized from the ground.

"Come!" he called. "Open up, will you?"

Not a sound answered the summons. Waiting a moment he pounded on the door again.

"If anyone's hurt," he called, "we want to know it. Open up and explain. We heard the call and we saw you at the window. Come on, open up!"

A stillness like death seemed to settle about the old building as they waited for some answer. A squirrel, disturbed by their shouting, whisked out from under the floor and rushed away towards the woods. Both the men started at its sudden appearance, and Frank seized a stout club from the ground.

"Something's up sure. We——" And then before Bob could finish the sound as of a stick snapping came from the further side of the building. With a rush they

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were around the corner, but only in time to see two men like fleeing shadows disappear among the trees.

With a cry they were off in hot pursuit. But the men had a good start, and in an instant were lost among the heavy underbrush.

"We can't catch them," Bob declared, as he ceased running. What in hell does it mean?"

"*They* didn't cry out."

"It must be someone in the shanty."

"Shall we go back?"

"Surely," Bob nodded. "Break in the door and let's find out what they've been up to."

Arming themselves with heavy clubs they hurried toward the clearing, coming out this time at the back of the building, to note a second door, which they made towards.

The building was perhaps a hundred feet long and thirty wide. Square openings had been made every few feet, but each one was closed with a wooden shutter. The door on the back and the one at the front seemed to be the only entrances.

The second door they found locked, a heavy hasp and huge padlock hanging on the outside.

"They slipped out this way and locked the door after them, while we were hammering away on the front," Bob declared with some disgust at being so easily outwitted.

"But what's inside?" Frank urged. "This old place hasn't been used for five years, at least. It was

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that long ago they were cutting timber up here. It's part of Sewell's property, and don't you remember, he stopped them a year after granting permission to cut? There was a raft of talk about it."

"Part of Sewell's property!" Bob exclaimed. "Yes, I remember," he nodded slowly, as he ran his eye up and down the long side of the unpainted building.

"Well, let's get at the bottom of it," Hemming urged.

They started at one end and tried each window in turn, with no results. All were fastened firmly on the inside.

"You can't pry one open," Bob explained, as they stopped after making a circle of the whole place. "There's a pin on the inside and it's as good a lock as you'd want."

"Well, good Heaven, man, let's get in some way," Frank urged. "The damn place can't certainly be burglar-proof."

For a moment they studied the building, and then Bob seized upon a couple of large stones from a pile of rocks near by. Quickly he let one drive at the nearest window shutter and then the second after it.

A volley soon drove the shutter in, and with a spring they were at the opening.

"It's as black as night in there," he exclaimed, stepping back.

The two peered in, but only the meagre outlines of the bare room could be made out.

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"Halloa!" Frank called. "Anyone there?" and they listened for a full minute, but no answer came to the hail.

Determined to get at the bottom of the mystery, they worked their way through the narrow opening and into the huge room. Then throwing open window after window and also the door at the front, they let the sunlight in, to reveal clearly a huge room lined with bunks between the windows, the floor a pile of dirty rubbish. Across the further end a rough partition was built.

"Nothing here," Hemming called as he made a hasty search of the bunks along the hall. "Let's try the other end."

They passed slowly to the door that led into that part of the building where the kitchen was located, with some uneasiness.

The cry that had aroused them still seemed to ring in their ears, while the sudden flight of the two men and the death-like stillness of the building and the silent woods about it was enough to put their nerves on edge.

Just an instant they paused at the opening and then both stepped into the kitchen itself.

A rusty old wood-stove was at the far end, and then, even before their eyes could turn to the farthest corner, a sound caught their ears, and both whirled toward the right.

Rubbish littered the floor, as in the main room, but in the far corner itself a heap of freshly cut branches was piled high. As the two turned toward them, they

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moved ever so slightly. With a spring both were across the room, and with nervous hands began throwing the boughs aside. The next instant they uncovered a man, bound and gagged.

With a cry Bob Hernald straightened suddenly, for before him lay Miss Sewell's servant, clothes torn and dirty, and across the forehead a deep red welt where a whip or heavy stick had left its mark.

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CHAPTER IV

PUZZLING FACTS

With quick fingers they tore the cords loose that bound the man and helped him to his feet.

For an instant he stood staring stupidly at them, and then his knees gave out and he sank a limp heap to the ground.

As they worked over him, Bob explained briefly to Hemming what he knew of the man, and then when he had regained his senses enough to move they led him to the open door and seated him on a box in the sunshine. The cool air drove a touch of colour into the pale cheeks, and he straightened slowly, drawing a deep breath. Then turning, he looked his rescuers over almost defiantly.

"Better take a drop of this," Bob suggested, offering his flask.

Kendon nodded and put it to his lips. As he handed it back, his eyes rested on Bob's face in a perplexed stare.

He was short of stature, but heavily built. His hair was almost white, and while well beyond sixty, under ordinary circumstances he looked much younger than his years. But now, the torn clothes, the deep red welt across the forehead and the pale cheeks made the old servant look his years, and more.

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"Who are you?" he suddenly demanded, the dazed look leaving his face. As he spoke, his fingers slowly followed the swollen lines on his wrists where the rope with which he had been bound had left its mark.

"We were coming through the woods," Bob explained. "Did you cry out?"

"Yes," Kendon nodded. "They were killing me. Where did they go."

"Two men got away and ran into the woods while we were hammering at the door. But what does it mean? What are you doing up here and what were they doing to you?"

"You aren't in league with them?" Kendon demanded suspiciously.

"Hardly," Frank laughed. "This is Mr. Hernald; I'm Mr. Hemming, both of the Hanover Club."

At the familiar name of the Club, Kendon's face brightened, and then suddenly he struggled to his feet and stared about him.

"Where am I?" he cried, as he threw out his hand to steady himself against the building. "Where am I? How far is it?"

"Sit down," Bob ordered suddenly. He could well see that the man had undergone rough treatment and was hardly himself.

He was puzzled, too, to find him here on the mountain side under such circumstances, when he had last heard of him as drunk in Wolfboro.

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"But where am I?" Kendon insisted, as he sank back on to the box.

"You're not far from Wilderness Lodge," Bob answered in a reassuring voice, "and we can get you there in short order as soon as you're able to walk. First, though, tell us how you came here and what those two fellows were doing to you."

"The Lodge," Kendon muttered. "How can I get to Wolfboro? I must get there at once. What day is it?"

"There's no need to go to Wolfboro," Bob answered, reading the servant's thoughts. "Miss Sewell is with her uncle, safe and sound."

For a long minute Kendon stared dumfounded at the tall young fellow before him, as if he could hardly believe his ears.

"Safe!" he muttered as his thin, nervous fingers stroked his cheek. "Safe! With Mr. Sewell. At Wilderness Lodge. Isn't she at Wolfboro?"

"No, she's not," Bob answered. "She's safe. I took her there myself."

"You!—You took her to Wilderness Lodge——" And then speech seemed to fail him and he could only stare, open-mouthed. Slowly he found his voice again. "You!" he muttered; "how do you know of Gale Sewell's niece?"

"I found her at the Wolfboro House, where you had left her. When you failed to return, I brought here over in my car."

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"You took her in your car, sir?"

"Yes. I was going back to the Club—it was only a short distance from there."

"But she must have been alarmed. What did she think? Did she not wonder at my leaving her?"

"Somewhat," Bob agreed drily, "and now, perhaps you'll be good enough to tell me what happened to you. Of course, it's not my affair, but perhaps you'll not mind explaining how you came to leave Miss Sewell as you did."

For an instant Kendon hesitated, and then slowly he gained his feet and shook himself. New life and strength seemed to flow in the old servant's veins, and his spirits quickened at the news of his mistress's safety. He had undergone hard handling, but, though sore in many a bone, he seemed more himself.

"Can't we go on, sir? I must get to Wilderness Lodge as quickly as I can."

"Can you walk?" Bob demanded.

"Yes." Kendon glanced about eagerly. "Let's get away from here."

With some water from a near-by spring, he washed the blood and dirt from his face and hands, and putting his clothes to rights as best he could, he made a fairly respectable appearance once more.

"You're sure you're all right?" Bob insisted.

"They didn't really do me any harm, sir, only they twisted my arm. It's a bit lame now. They were trying

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to make me tell them something, and when you came they bound me up and left me."

"Trying to make you tell them something!" Bob repeated, as the three, Kendon between them, started down the wood-road away from the clearing.

"They wanted me to tell them about some things," Kendon began, speaking quickly, "and I didn't know—that is——" And then he hesitated and ended somewhat lamely: "They tied a rope on my arm and twisted it. That was when I cried out."

Bob studied the man's seemingly stolid face in some doubt.

"Who were they?" Frank suddenly put in, speaking for the first time since they had started.

"I don't know, sir. I never saw them before. They brought me right here after they carried me off, and I've been here ever since. Two or three hours before you arrived they came back to me and tried to get me to tell——" And then sudden silence fell on Kendon again.

"You don't know who they are?" Bob repeated incredulously. "But surely you must have some idea."

"I never saw them before," Kendon insisted with great positiveness, shaking his white head slowly. As he spoke, his eyes never turned to the one he was addressing, but stared straight ahead of him with an almost vacant look.

Bob made up his mind that the man was still suffer-

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ing from his experience and resolved to lead him carefully back over past events.

"Was the carriage broken down?" he demanded, turning toward Kendon to note his expression at the question.

The old servant's face never altered, nor did he even glance up.

"No," he answered slowly, "a wheel was off, but they did that—yet it wasn't the carriage I wired for. There is some reason in it. At first I thought it must be on account of Miss Sewell, but it seems it was I whom they wanted. I can't——" And then he stopped suddenly with a shake of his head.

With a shrug Bob glanced towards Hemming, who shook his head in perplexity, for to him the old servant was a puzzle.

Finally they reached the main road where they dropped on to a shaded bank, for Kendon had shown signs of fatigue. For a long while they sat there, the two talking quietly apart while Kendon sat stolidly silent, slowly twisting a bit of grass in his fingers. He seemed lost in thought, but as they were about to start on again, he turned to one and then to the other of his two companions, and for the first time raised his eyes from a constant study of the ground before him.

"I want to thank you gentlemen," he said, speaking slowly. "If it hadn't been for you, I should have—well, I don't know what would have happened to me. But, principally, for the help given Miss Sewell. The

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thought that she was left alone in Wolfboro nearly drove me mad. What she would have done, had you not come to her rescue, Mr. Hernald, it is hard to say."

"She'd have waited a little longer, that's all," Bob put in. "Mr. Sewell had sent for her."

"Sent for her?" Kendon questioned with a perplexed stare. "Sent for her?"

"Why, yes. Someone sent word that Miss Sewell was left alone——"

"Someone sent word? I don't understand."

"No more do I," Bob agreed a bit sharply, for he was beginning to lose patience with the riddle. "All I know is that just as Miss Sewell and I were a half-mile or so from Wilderness Lodge, we met another car, headed down the mountain. Mr. Sewell's secretary was in it. He said someone had telephoned that you had met with an—er—accident. They were on their way to Wolfboro."

"Mr. Sewell's secretary? Mr. Sewell has no secretary."

"Well, this fellow so names himself. Perhaps he was a groom or a gardener or something. At any rate, he was in the car with two other men, and they knew you had met with an accident and that Miss Sewell was stranded in Wolfboro."

Kendon's eyes had fastened on the other's face as he spoke, and for a long time he continued to stare as if he neither understood what had been said nor could quite make out the speaker.

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"It might have been Mr. Marsden's car; Mr. Sewell hasn't one."

"Perhaps it was," Bob agreed, "though I doubt it, for I asked them if it was Jack Marsden's, and they said no."

"Mr. Jack's car was there before I left," Kendon agreed, still seemingly speaking as if he were groping for his words. "Yet what does it mean? What does it mean? Who would have telephoned to Mr. Sewell? Who could have called himself Mr. Sewell's secretary? I don't understand—I can't make daylight out of it. I don't know how anyone could have found out about—about——" And then as he hesitated his lips closed tightly as if he were afraid he would say too much.

Already the sun was close to setting and the long twilight would be on them before long. Bob glanced at his watch.

"If you're ready to go on," he suggested, "we'd better start; it's getting pretty late."

The old servant rose slowly and started down the road with a weary nod. His walk was mechanical, as had been his words. The two men exchanged glances, and Frank shook his head as he tapped his forehead.

"No, I don't think so," Bob answered, as they slowly followed Kendon who, for the moment, seemed to have forgotten them completely. "There's something underneath that's deeper than we think. He was evidently carried off by these men and they've been trying to get some information out of him. Remember what he said

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about their wanting him to tell them about something? He's been worrying over Miss Sewell, and that, with the other, has got him dazed. I doubt if he really knows what happened to him. And, too, I think he's a little afraid of saying too much to us for fear of letting some secret out of the bag. If he told who the men were, or why they carried him off or, in fact, said anything about it at all, he'd have to tell the whole story, and that he doesn't want to do."

"But how about the telephone message?" Henming suggested.

"Perhaps they had a sense of chivalry about them, so telephoned to Wilderness Lodge, not wanting to leave Miss Sewell stranded all night."

"Hardly plausible, but as good as any explanation one can make."

"Rather, when, in fact, one can't get head or tail of the whole business, with what little light we have now."

"And no more seems available, at least, not out of him," and Frank nodded toward the short, broad-shouldered little man before them, who was trudging along, hat in hand.

"I wish to thunder Jack Marsden would turn up. I'm frankly curious over the whole thing and would like to get some facts. He's thick with Sewell; at least, his father is. They were old college chums, and Marsden's Sewell's legal representative. Jack would know the inside."

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"And furnish a means of meeting the Lady Simplicity," Frank added, with a laugh.

"Did I call her that? Well, she is. Oh, laugh, but you meet her once and see. Why, she knows nothing of the world, but she's as charming. She is——"

"So you've said. When does Jack come back?"

"I don't know. He's too uncertain to count on. He likes old Winnepesaukee well enough, though, to turn up at any time. The last letter I had indicated a home yearning had begun to stir within him somewhere."

"You might wire that a charming mademoiselle has dropped suddenly from the skies, to become mistress of Wilderness Lodge. He'd bite."

"Yes, I dare say he would." Bob nodded, as they stepped ahead to Kendon's side.

At last they drew near to the cross-roads high up on the mountain side. To the right the road led down toward the Hanover Club, while to the left was the way to Wilderness Lodge.

"You weren't such a long way from home, after all," Bob suggested as they stopped.

"No," Kendon agreed, turning to look down the road in the direction of Wilderness Lodge. The sound of an approaching automobile could be heard.

The three slipped back toward the side of the road as the car came down on them. It drew up suddenly. In the gathering darkness two men could be seen in it. One was in the tonneau, and as the car came to a stop he threw open the door and stepped down.

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"Kendon!" His voice was deep, attention compelling in its tone. "You here? Why, man, what's happened you?" Then his eyes turned. "Ah!" he exclaimed, with some surprise as he noted the other two—"Mr. Hernald."

"Mr. Marsden!" Bob grasped the extended hand. "This is my friend, Mr. Hemming."

The lawyer shook hands and then turned quickly back to Kendon.

"What in the world are doing here?" he demanded. "Where have you been, man? When did you land and what has happened?"

"When did I land!" Kendon exclaimed. "Did you not get my wire?"

"Wire? We've had no word from you—not even when you sailed."

"No word!" Kendon mumbled, bewilderment showing in voice and look, and then suddenly, as he hesitated for words, a swift change—one of alarm—crossed his face. "But Miss Sewell, she has explained."

"Miss Sewell!" Marsden repeated. "Did you find Miss Sewell?"

"Find her!" Kendon almost shouted; "of course I found her. I wired that I had. We got to New York Saturday. I wired you from there. We reached Wolfboro yesterday and I was carried off, I——"

"You were carried off!" Marsden broke in. "What do you mean?"

"What I say," Kendon rushed on, his words tumbling

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one upon the other. "I was carried off. These gentlemen have but just rescued me—they can tell you. But Miss Sewell! Why—this gentleman brought her to Wilderness Lodge."

The two had been standing speechless as the old servant rattled on, but now as Marsden turned toward them, Bob stepped forward.

"Why, yes," he agreed. "By chance I came across Miss Sewell in Wolfboro, and I found out who she was. Kendon had disappeared, and so I brought her over in my car."

For an instant Marsden looked the three over in blank amazement, as if they, and possibly he, were bereft of their senses.

"Brought her over!" he finally demanded. "Brought her over! To Wilderness Lodge? Why, man, there is no Miss Sewell at Wilderness Lodge."

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CHAPTER V

A TORN GLOVE

WILDERNESS LODGE was the wonder place of the country side. Years before Gale Sewell had come to New Hampshire, a hundred spots being named by the gossips as the place from whence he had hailed, and, purchasing a tract of two thousand odd acres of wild mountain land, begun the erection of a house and the laying out of grounds.

Roads had been built; underbrush cut away, and a dozen acres made into a cultivated park and woodland, while through the forest and woods, left wild as before, the drive and roads had been extended.

In the middle of the park, a mile, easily, from the public road, he had begun to build. From his own grounds he had quarried the rock, and slowly the house had grown.

It was a huge, low, two-story building; in parts, the first story running clear to the roof, and as soon as the first few rooms were completed he had moved in, with his one servant.

Then for years the building went slowly on, the work being superintended by Gale Sewell himself, and proving a means of occupation for his mind and body.

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With his own hands he finished some of the rooms. At times, with a trowel borrowed from one of the masons, he laid stone upon stone.

Then parts already completed were town down, the lines of the building changed and once again the slow work went on.

As a means of occupation for the owner, Wilderness Lodge proved eminently successful. He took rare pleasure in the task, though why he could wish such a huge, rambling house no one was able to say.

But to Gale Sewell, the work seemed never finished. One wing was simply completed when new plans were devised and another begun. He was his own architect, his own designer, and he consulted no one in the work but himself and his personal whims.

Thus until tired, he kept at the task, and finally the building stood a gray pile of wandering wings and towers, a perfect labyrinth of two hundred odd rooms. Some were furnished and some were empty, that was as the owner had pleased. The stable, as elaborate as the house, stood vacant, except that a number of men employed on the place lived in it.

The gardener's house, an electric light plant, a huge icehouse together with a shop and laboratory made up the out-buildings, without counting a half-completed tower started some five years before and located on the crest of a high knoll, a good half mile through the wood to the north of the house.

It was, however, the main building that excited the

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curiosity of the country-side, and about it and its owner strange tales flew fast and never ending.

The building, strange to say, was shrouded with more mystery than Gale Sewell himself. He had, it seems, been set down years before as a rich man desiring to live in retirement, and so dismissed.

But the house—acknowledged as his hobby—was made a place of deep mystery. It was big enough to have, as it was credited with having, mysterious rooms, secret passages and hidden stairways. Why they existed no one could say, unless because no man would build a home of such size on the ordinary plan.

The furniture of the rooms was credited with being as rich as that adorning an Eastern palace. Pine boxes and crates had come to Wilderness Lodge soon after it was finished, and many had borne foreign marks. This in itself was enough to set a quiet New England country-side talking.

Some of these tales were known to Bob Hernald, and while many were discredited by common sense or by Jack Marsden, still, even to him, an air of mystery shrouded Wilderness Lodge and its tall, gaunt gray-haired owner.

It was thus with a feeling of suppressed excitement, a good deal increased by Mr. Marsden's statement that Miss Sewell had not reached her destination, that he found himself within its portals.

Frank Hemming, though stirred to as great a curiosity as the other, had gone on to the Hanover Club,

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while Hernald and Kendon had joined Mr. Marsden, and with him had hurried back down the road, the car put to its best speed.

At the huge doorway, flanked with heavy stone columns, they paused for an instant at a sign from Marsden.

"Mr. Sewell," the lawyer began, turning to Kendon, his deep voice carefully modulated, "is ill—very ill. Doctor Bashton is with him. We must go into this matter of Miss Sewell at once. Mr. Hernald, will you step in?" and slipping a key into the front door he threw it open.

They entered a huge, square hall, two stories high, with a wide balcony running about the second floor. The walls were panelled in a dark wood, and huge pillars with half-arched brackets supported the balcony. At the far end a wide staircase led upward, and at the right a fireplace of rough stone could be seen. The whole struck one as tremendous in its proportions, while each detail was massive and, if anything, overheavy.

The lawyer led the way toward the left, and throwing open a door almost hidden in the dark paneled wall, touched an electric button, sending a shower of light over a long, low-ceiled room lined with book-cases well filled with volumes.

About the room huge chairs were scattered, while in the centre stood a table of tremendous size. On it a broad lamp threw a flood of light over books and maga-

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zines, so brilliantly lighting the table itself that the balance of the room seemed in shadow.

"I believe in a proper condition at all times," Marsden suggested with a smile, as if endeavouring to put his guest at ease. "Kendon, you look as if you needed a bite yourself. Send in some cold meat and something to drink. I have brought over James and one of my other men since Mr. Sewell was taken ill. Let them serve us, and as soon as you have eaten come back."

Kendon, who had hardly spoken a word, hurried from the room, accepting Mr. Marsden's suggestions—they were made as suggestions, Bob noticed, not given as orders—as unquestionable, while he himself dropped into an easy chair by the table. He felt glad that he had at last come upon someone who would undoubtedly explain much that seemed most puzzling just now, and also he was not sorry to find himself at Wilderness Lodge, where his thoughts for the last few days had rested.

Though he had roomed with Jack Marsden at college, played on the 'Varsity ball team, and rowed in the same crew with him, he really knew but little of Marsden Senior.

He had met him before, many times, but never for more than a word. Now he studied the solidly built figure before him with interest. In the father he could see many traits he knew well in the son. The two looked somewhat alike, and yet it was really little more than a passing resemblance.

The man before him was short, with square shoul-

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ders, as was the son. The high forehead was there, but yet there was a harder, sharper look in the father's face. It was due, no doubt, to the years, and, too, to the work, for Henry Marsden was noted as a clever handler of knotty, legal tangles.

"I feel that I know you very well," Marsden began, as a tray well laden was placed before them. "We've met, of course, and, too, Jack has spoken of you so often —you and he are pretty close."

"As close, I think," Bob agreed, "as I am to any man."

"Exactly," Marsden nodded as he passed over a plate of meat and pushed an ice cold bottle of beer toward Bob's hand, "and that's why I've sent Kendon away for a moment. You're naturally curious, and so am I. But the inner man first, or possibly at one and the same time. Now you, I think, know a lot more than do I. Suppose you relate what has transpired. You say you brought one calling herself Miss Sewell here from Wolfboro."

"Yes," Bob agreed eagerly, only too anxious for the question to be broached. "I brought her——" And then he paused suddenly and eyed his companion sharply, —"one calling herself Miss Sewell——" He used Marsden's own words. "What do you mean by that?"

For a moment Marsden stared steadily at the other without answering and then, very slowly:

"I feel as if I could speak plainly to you, Mr. Hernald. As I said, I feel that I know you—and yet—

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well,"—the broad shoulders were shrugged apologetically,—" it's not really my affair, so I hesitate. But go on, please. Tell me what you know, and then I'll return frankness with frankness."

" Well, I must admit I don't understand the thing at all," Bob declared, now thoroughly perplexed by the other's manner. " But I've nothing to conceal. Frankness is not only demanded of me, considering my connection with this affair, but gladly given."

" Oh, I used the word advisedly, Mr. Hernald," Marsden replied, with a laugh. " Go ahead! You see, I never knew Kendon was in this country until I met him on the road. It rather startled me."

" I should think it might," Bob agreed, and then with a brief touch he told of his meeting with Meryl Sewell, of her coming with him, of the second car on the road and then of how he and Frank Hemming had found Kendon.

Through it all Marsden sat leaning back in his huge arm-chair, an interested listener. Two deep furrows were between his eyes and the brows were drawn down so that he looked out from under them in a strained stare. The look was sharp, for the eyes were bright and penetrating, but no expression appeared in them or on the face, and not a muscle moved, nor was there any sign on the lawyer's part of either surprise or disbelief in the story. The long white fingers slowly smoothed the closely cropped gray moustache or touched the thin, white hair, and that was all.

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"I see," he nodded as Bob paused. "Have you any doubt that the lady was Miss Sewell?"

"Have I any doubt! Why—but I fail to understand. Isn't she Miss Sewell?"

"Of course! Of course!" Marsden agreed with a wave of his hand. "I was repeating my thoughts—of course you know nothing. She told you her name was Meryl Sewell, that is all you know," and he nodded slowly.

For a moment Bob considered. He seemed again to meet a strange reticence, as in the case of Kendon. Possibly he had by chance stumbled upon a family skeleton that no one desired to unearth. If that was the case—but no. He had started from Wolfboro with Meryl Sewell, or someone by that name. Someone who he suddenly realised was becoming of considerable interest to him. He was responsible for her to a certain extent, for she had last been in his care and now—where was she? What had happened her? That he would find out, to the end of setting right what he had done. Harm should not come to her through an act of his, family skeletons or no.

Marsden was the first to break the silence. He turned suddenly to the table and ran through a pile of photographs. Selecting one, he handed it across the table.

"Did the lady look like that?"

"Is it—no, it's not she—but yes, exactly, only younger."

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"I see. Then a point can be considered settled," Marsden agreed, taking the photograph and slipping it carefully into his pocket, instead of replacing it on the table. "You see, Mr. Hernald, I have the failing of most lawyers—after the flaws in the case. But now I think some light is due you. To begin with, I personally doubted it was Meryl Sewell whom you met."

"But she said that was her name. What photograph is that? Her mother? Certainly there is a family resemblance somewhere between the girl I saw and that photograph, and, too, why, if you saw her——"

"How old was she?" Marsden broke in.

"Oh, as to age, twenty; no, twenty-three."

"Yes—er—I think you are right. There can be no doubt."

"Why should you think there is?"

"Because Meryl Sewell, Joseph Sewell's daughter, died when a baby."

"Died!" Bob repeated. "Then who——"

"Is this girl you find stranded in Wolfboro?" Marsden shook his head. "You see, I am as puzzled as are you."

"But——" And then Bob suddenly recalled the old servant, who in the excitement of the conversation he had forgotten. "Kendon! He can perhaps explain; in fact, he must know."

"Perhaps Kendon can explain," the lawyer agreed, "*if* he will."

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For a moment Bob searched the seemingly expressionless face before him for a meaning to the words.

"Again, I don't understand," he answered. "Don't you think we are at odds in this discussion? You see, Mr. Marsden, whoever the girl may be, I feel, to a certain extent, responsible for her. I induced her to leave Wolfboro in my car. I brought her as far as the hill below here and then allowed her to pass into the hands of men of whom I presume you knew nothing."

"What!" Marsden demanded sharply. "Oh, no,"—his lips parted again in an easy smile—"no, hardly. I know nothing of Mr. Sewell's secretary, as he named himself."

"Of course not. Well, these men must be somewhere. I allowed this girl to go with them. I propose to find her."

For a moment the lawyer sat silently stroking his moustache, a favourite trick of his. Then he rose quickly to his feet.

"So do I, Mr. Hernald. I propose to find out who this Meryl Sewell can be and where she is. You certainly can be of great assistance, and I'm glad to hear you say you are ready to join in the search. You see, I'm tied up here. Mr. Sewell is ill—dangerously so; he demands my almost constant attendance, and this work, if done at all, must be done quietly and secretly."

"Or publicly," Bob suggested. "A motor car with three men and a girl in it can't go running around the

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country, even up here, without being seen. Publish a description broadcast, and we'll find them at once."

Marsden shook his head. "A quiet search is the only way. You'll see it yourself when I give you more facts. Can you wait? Good! I must run up to Mr. Sewell's room, and, too, I'll look up Kendon. I want to ask him a few questions and then I'll give you some inside history that will clear the puzzle a good bit. When you understand all, we can arrange a plan. Make yourself at home. There are some good books on those shelves. I may be gone a half hour, at least," and with a nod and smile the lawyer slipped from the room.

But to turn to books was impossible. Events that day had run too fast, and his interest in the plight of Meryl Sewell, for he so considered her, was too deep.

He could picture the girl even more clearly than before he had learned of her plight. The bronze hair over the temples, half covering the ears, framed a face each line clearly pictured to him now. But the eyes, large, dark ones, that looked out so innocently, so trustingly, as if the world and all was a strange place, expected to be undoubtedly kind to one so innocent of its ways. They seemed to be before him, looking down, asking help.

She had trusted in him and he had brought her to what?

His blood leaped at the thought of what might befall her. Why did Marsden go so slow? Time was pre-

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cious. Why, it was now three days, three days—she might be dead.

And so, with these thoughts, he paced up and down the long library, as was his habit when perplexed or excited.

For ten minutes he tramped, and then calming down a bit he began to turn over the magazines and books on the table. None interested him, and half impatiently he turned. As he did so a magazine was brushed to the floor.

Stooping quickly to pick it up, his finger touched something soft. The next instant he straightened and in his hand lay a tiny glove. A brown glove—tiny, rumpled, pathetic as it hung limp. And the palm was ripped. A little tear, but in the right glove.

Slowly he looked about the room in blank question. Meryl Sewell had worn brown gloves and the right one had been ripped—a little rip in the palm, that he had noticed as she sat beside him during their ride from Wolfboro.

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CHAPTER VI

A STRANGE CALLER

For an instant Bob stood staring at the little glove in his hand, and then at a sound from the doorway thrust it quickly into his pocket.

He felt as if he was moving in a maze of never-ending tangles. Light, seemingly so, rushed in one moment, and then came some new turn that threw the whole business out of gear again.

Marsden had declared Meryl Sewell had not reached Wilderness Lodge, and yet here was one of her gloves in his pocket. She must, therefore, have been in the very room itself, for how else could the glove have been dropped where he had found it? Too, Marsden had hinted at Kendon's being able to clear up a good many facts, *if* he would talk. In that mere suggestion had, of course, been the hidden meaning that he would not, in the lawyer's opinion.

But Kendon had shown real anxiety for Meryl Sewell's safety—Meryl Sewell! Marsden as good as said she was not Meryl Sewell, and in the next breath agreed she could be no one else.

It was a strange jumble, and Bob Hernald in perplexity watched the stooping figure of Kendon as he came toward him.

"Has Mr. Marsden explained matters at all, sir?"

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Kendon suddenly demanded, coming to a stop before Bob. He looked up quickly from under his shaggy eyebrows—thin, spare brows, like a poor brush that had lost most of its bristles. In his voice there was a note of equality, and the "sir" was seemingly added as an afterthought.

"Hardly," Bob answered, with a laugh. A sudden dislike for the short, squatty servant came over him. Whatever was the underlying secret in the whole affair, an innocent girl was the sufferer, and because of this man before him. If he hadn't left her stranded in Wolfboro, the whole business would have had no beginning. Too, why this dogged silence and sphynx-like manner? And more, why this sharp question, with its underlying note of intimation that Mr. Marsden could explain matters, when the servant himself, beyond all question, could give more information than anyone else.

Kendon eyed the other stolidly, but recovered himself sufficiently to hand across a match tray as Bob drew a cigarette from his case.

"Hardly," Bob repeated, as he settled himself on the arm of a huge chair. "But hasn't he seen you? Mr. Marsden left here a good ten minutes ago with the purpose of looking you up."

"I have not seen him."

"Well, he was going to see Mr. Sewell first. But you—you don't seem to be very much disturbed over this thing, yet when we pulled you out of that old bunk house you were keen to rush back to Wolfboro. Now

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you seem to accept Miss Sewell's disappearance as a matter of course."

"Yes," Kendon nodded, "it has happened. She is gone!"

"True," Bob agreed, a tinge of sarcasm in his voice, "and no one seems to think much of it. Even Mr. Marsden advocates caution in the search for her."

"And don't you agree with him?" Kendon demanded.

"No, I don't; but then, what of it?" he put in, suddenly remembering that he was discussing with a servant Mr. Marsden's acts. "He knows best, I suppose."

"Yes," Kendon agreed, "and Mr. Sewell is too ill to do anything."

"Have you seen him."

"Yes."

"And told him of what has befallen his niece?"

"Yes."

"Well, what does he say—how does he take it? It must be a terrible blow to him."

"Yes." Again came the monosyllabic reply.

For a moment Bob considered the one before him in absolute perplexity. He was tempted to vent his opinion in no mistakable language, for Kendon's attitude was one of hostility, if not verging upon rudeness.

But instead, he checked himself, and rising crossed the room slowly.

With a turn he came back and paused halfway to Kendon.

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"Mr. Marsden will be back directly—at least, he said so, then perhaps, as he will have had a talk with Mr. Sewell, we can arrange for some set programme."

"I see," Kendon agreed, letting the words come out slowly, and with that he turned, and walking to the far end of the room stood gazing silently out of the long porch window.

Bob watched him go, and for a moment stood contemplating the square back. Then with a toss of the head and a smile, he threw himself into one of the arm-chairs, and settling down comfortably gave himself up to a contemplation of the whole affair and his cigarette.

It seemed, as the clock ticked away, the only sound in the room, that somewhere under the puzzling surface of what had actually happened there must be a clear explanation and a very, very simple one.

So far, none had seemed anxious to talk, and yet eventually they must,—even the surly Kendon,—and from that talk facts could be put together that would not only throw light on the whole matter, but enable one to easily locate the men who had carried Meryl Sewell away. It was seemingly impossible to him that these men could have known of her being in America and yet not be identified either by Gale Sewell, Kendon or, most certainly, Marsden, a man versed in the unravelling of tangled threads.

Had Kendon a finger in the pie, to the extent of being responsible for Meryl Sewell's disappearance? Hardly, in view of his own abduction—and then, as Bob's hand

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sought his cigarette case, his fingers touched the rumpled glove.

Rising to his feet he started to cross to Kendon, resolved, as Marsden did not return, to show the glove to the old servant and to find, at least, if he recognised it as Meryl Sewell's, and if so, what explanation he could make of it being in that very room.

The heavy rug deadened his footsteps, and he was close to the servant when the latter turned suddenly. For an instant they eyed each other, then the sound that had caused Kendon to wheel fell on their ears again. It came from the far end of the library. Both stood silent, listening.

They were in shadow by the window and so were the bookcases at the other end. Yet, as they watched, one section of the shelves—they were built about the wall a solid row—moved ever so slightly.

Bob cast one glance at the still expressionless face of the old servant and then stepped back beside him.

The bookcase swung out as if hinged. They could hardly see it move, except that the light bindings gradually turned from them and the dark back of the case met their gaze.

A black spot appeared where the shelves had stood, and then out of it stepped a man. He was dressed in a dark suit, and over his eyes a light slouch hat was drawn low.

A slight breeze came from the opening and rustled the

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book leaves on the table. On it was borne the odour of burning tin, such as comes from a dark lantern. Again Bob glanced at Kendon, feeling that he was the one, knowing the house and being the trusted servant of its owner, to make any move that was to be made.

But Kendon stood quiet, no expression on his face, seemingly accepting a moving bookcase as a common occurrence.

The man glanced quickly about the room, as if to make sure he was alone, and then advanced with certainty across the soft rug.

Straight to the table he made his way, and quickly began to look it over.

The books and magazines he brushed aside hurriedly, and then with more care he repeated his search. Finally he stopped and glancing about, dropped to his knees to feel along the rug.

Again Bob stole a glance at Kendon, but the old servant was seemingly as immovable as a statue.

A sound at the door drew the eyes of the two watchers in that direction, as Marsden threw it open and stepped across the threshold.

Down went a book with a crash from the table, and the three turned at the sound as the lawyer was about to speak.

Out of the bright light of the lamp on the table flitted the shadow of a man. Into the shadows at the far end of the room he passed, and then, with the slightest sound in the world, the bookcase moved back slowly into

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place, showing an even row of white volumes, while the three turned and stared at one another.

Kendon's face was as immovable as ever, but on Marsden's a flush of anger showed for an instant, and then an easy laugh hung on his lips.

"One of our strange doors, Mr. Hernald," he laughed. "The old place is full of them, is it not, Kendon?"

"There are a few, sir," the servant agreed.

No question as to the man, who he was or what might be his errand.

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CHAPTER VII

SKELETONS

"COME!" Marsden spoke quickly, "let's get at this thing; sit down, Mr. Hernald, and, Kendon, you must join us, take that chair."

But Kendon stood irresolute, hesitating as between following the suggestion—nearer a command—or his natural inclination to leave the room at once.

The moving bookcase was no novelty to him, and yet to have it opened by one he had never seen before was perplexing, even if his studied stoicism failed to indicate that fact to Bob Hernald. His master knew how to work that bookcase and so did he. Possibly Mr. Marsden was acquainted with its intricacy, though Gale Sewell had taken such keen delight in his few little "trick" passages and doors that he had not even divulged them all to his closest friend and only companion since he had built Wilderness Lodge.

It was, therefore, with interest that the old servant watched the man enter the room and he planned to stop him only when he had divulged his purpose.

Then the lawyer had appeared suddenly, and before Kendon, slow of foot under any circumstances, could move, the intruder was gone.

Yet even now, if he could get away, he might catch

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him as he emerged from the house. There was only one exit from the passage, unless one followed an inside staircase which led directly to Mr. Sewell's bedroom.

So Kendon moved to the door, instead of toward the chair indicated by the lawyer.

"I must go back to Mr. Sewell, sir."

"Go back to Mr. Sewell!" Marsden repeated. "But, Kendon, this matter of Miss Sewell. It must be taken up at once. Mr. Sewell has but spoken of it to me, though too weak, really, to go into it at any length," the lawyer added, turning to Bob. "We, however, can take it up. You must give me all the information you have. I must know of your trip, and——"

"I will, sir," Kendon broke in, his tone servile, apologetic, "in a moment." And before further objections could be raised to his going he had fled.

Marsden watched the door close, a flush high on his cheeks. As the latch clicked, he shot a glance down the room to where the bookcase had moved so strangely, and then faced his companion, the flush fading, a smile on his lips again.

"It doesn't seem possible," he remarked, almost as if speaking to himself.

"No, it doesn't," Bob agreed, jumping at the lawyer's meaning and catching it too, "but you should have seen him just before you came in, or rather, just after you left. His manner was as if I was responsible for Miss Sewell's disappearance."

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"You mean——! What can the fellow be thinking of? But you see," Marsden hurried on, "he's a privileged character. Mr. Sewell has made a great deal of him, and he has, at times, the way of taking liberties."

"Yet why such an attitude?"

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders.

"Possibly you know too much—he may resent your presence here."

"A guilty conscience?"

"Er—no—no." There was a slow shaking of the head. "No, I would hardly say that. You see, Kendon has always been a trusted servant, yet in this matter—well, as a lawyer, as Mr. Sewell's legal representative, outside of all personal feelings, I am bound to look with suspicion on everyone. One can't do much else. You're a lawyer, yourself, Mr. Hernald, and must admit I am compelled to examine all parties concerned, with suspicion, giving them, of course, the advantage of the doubt."

"Most certainly!" Bob agreed with emphasis, for the lawyer seemed more than anxious to excuse even the slightest feeling of suspicion he had allowed himself to express toward Kendon. "You can do no less, I included."

"Oh, no!" The lawyer's laugh was hearty now. "You simply saw an attractive girl in distress, and going your way. Your act was that which any man would have performed."

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"But I should never have turned her over to those fellows on the road. I didn't know them."

"That occurs to you now—it didn't at the time, or you wouldn't have done so. Why should you have thought for an instant a man meeting you, as he did, claiming to be Gale Sewell's secretary, was anyone else?"

"Oh, I can justify my act," Bob agreed, biting his lips in perplexity, "but that doesn't alter the fact that I committed an error, and by my act this girl is the sufferer."

"And, therefore, you are anxious, naturally, to counteract it."

"I am. I shall not rest until she's found."

"Then I've a proposition to make you. I am Mr. Sewell's friend, as you know—that's the personal side which we put away for an instant. From a business standpoint I am Mr. Sewell's legal adviser, having charge of all his affairs. Now, in this matter, my hands, or rather my personal services, are limited by the demands my friend will make upon me. Someone else must take up the search. Detectives can be had, but they are often bunglers, and besides, Mr. Sewell, particularly in his present nervous condition of health, objects to any outsider coming in. I know you,—not so well personally, but through Jack,—and, besides, you are a lawyer, an added advantage. Therefore, I wish to suggest that you accept a retainer in this matter. You may have to give up some time—in fact,

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while we may clear this thing up quickly—it may take weeks."

For a moment Bob considered the suggestion, which came rather unexpectedly.

"Is there any need of a retainer? It seems hardly as though that formality should be gone through with. I look upon the affair from a personal standpoint, Mr. Marsden——"

"Yes! Yes! I agree," the other broke in, "but why discuss it? If it were between you and me, we could arrange the thing quickly, but Sewell is to be considered. He is a very methodical man, Mr. Hernald. In business matters he is as red-taped as the worst of us. I must be able to tell him that you have accepted a retainer. Oh, a nominal one, if you like. That is left to you. Otherwise he will not rest easy."

"Agreed to, then," Bob nodded, "if it is put in that light."

"Good! Now we can go on."

Then he saw more clearly the lawyer's point, or at least, thought he did. If family skeletons were to be unearthed, he would learn of them as attorney for Mr. Sewell. Perhaps in no other light did the strange owner of Wilderness Lodge desire that they should be divulged to an outsider.

"To go back," Marsden was saying, "as is necessary, there were two brothers—Gale Sewell and Joseph Sewell. I went to college with them, knew them both personally, and so can speak of their affairs which lead

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