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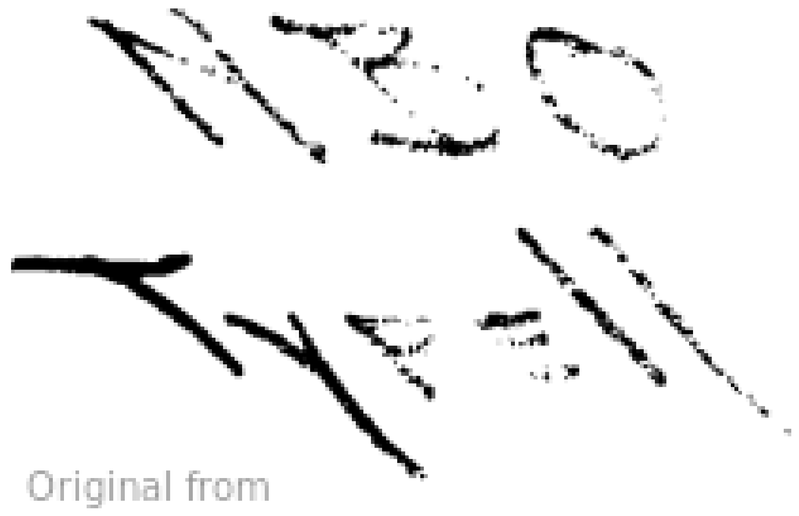

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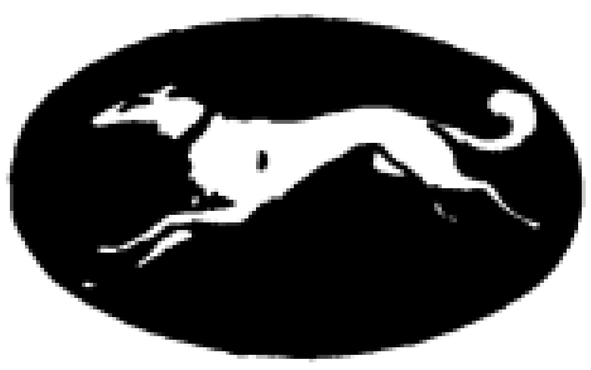

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CHAPTER I

ALONG THE LAKE SHORE

Stuart Wayne had taken a day from work in which to celebrate his good fortune. The early mail that morning had brought to his bachelor-apartments in the Cressenden Building a very substantial check—the first royalty returns on his new book—accompanied by an exceedingly pleasant letter written by his publishers in New York, stating that the work was enjoying an excellent sale.

As this was the first time he had succeeded in achieving any popular demand Wayne felt entitled to a brief vacation.

However, his methods were naturally quiet ones. He had not resided in Chicago for any great length of time, scarcely long enough to become habituated to the city, or to form a wide circle of acquaintances. Indeed, outside of certain professional friendships, and a few old-time chums, encountered by chance at the University Club, he scarcely felt that he really knew any one.

He had worked hard, supporting himself by the writing of special newspaper and magazine articles, and therefore found little time in which to cultivate the social side of life. To be sure, he had come to the city armed with several letters of introduction, of a kind to open numerous desirable doors, but thus far these had never been

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presented and, as the busy months passed, he had felt less and less desire to present them.

His work fascinated him and now, finally on the threshold of success, he was quite content to remain alone, his thoughts busied with reawakened ambition. Hence his present quiet celebration was entirely in accordance with the occasion.

He had lunched with Bob Carlton at the University. Bob was a good fellow, sympathetic and jolly; it had been a pleasure to talk over his plans, and voice his ambitions, with one possessing such practical business views, such an optimistic conception of life. Their conversation left him with a firmer grip on himself, and a clearer view of the future.

But Carlton had important business engagements, preventing long lingering at table. After his departure, Wayne wandered rather aimlessly about the rooms, seeking vainly some other acquaintance, until at last, lured by the resplendent beauty of the out-of-doors, he took a Cottage Grove Avenue open car, and journeyed southward.

By three o'clock, still alone, and with thoughts already beginning to concentrate upon a new plot, he reclined quite contentedly upon a bench in Jackson Park, gazing forth upon the wide expanse of Lake Michigan, practically oblivious to all that was going on about him.

A fresh breeze was blowing from the north, heavy enough to send the swell of waves dashing against the breakwater in white wreaths of spray, and to crown the more distant crests with lines of creamy foam. Against the far horizon two steamers were visible, both northbound, black volumes of smoke pouring from their stacks, outlined in fantastic figures against the deep-blue of the

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sky; while closer in toward the shore a number of small yachts were speeding about like white-winged birds.

There were a few fishermen on the pier, the park itself was bright with picnic-parties, while from a distance the noisy enthusiasm of an amateur ball-game rendered the air vocal. A continuous stream of humanity poured up and down the high stone steps leading to the doors of the German Restaurant, while along the broad driveway skirting the shore, passed and repassed a continuous procession of motors. Only the long cement walk appeared partially deserted, avoided by pedestrians because of the strong wind, and the occasional bursts of spray drenching its surface.

For some time he sat there, contrasting the different types that passed him by, but finally becoming restless he rose abruptly and whistled sharply to the driver of a passing cab. The equipage ground to a stop, and its pilot, with amazing dexterity considering the crowded boulevard, had the cab beside Wayne in less than half a minute. The author stepped in.

"Where to?" the driver demanded.

"Just drive," Wayne told him, "I'm out for air and plenty of it."

The other nodded, the gears clattered, and slowly along the blue water-front the cab began to move northward. Lolling back on the cushions, Wayne enjoyed it thoroughly; the sight of young girls, fresh-skinned and supple, driving their own machines; elderly business men bound for the links, tourist parties wearing out-of-date clothes and with northern Michigan stamped on their faces clattering by in wheezy cars; soldiers and sailors walking with their sweethearts near the spray-lashed quay.

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Not a vehicle that passed or its occupants escaped the professional momentary scrutiny in which he had trained himself and which had become an almost unconscious habit.

He had been riding for perhaps ten minutes when he became aware of another taxicab, a somber black one with mud on its wheel-guards, drawing abreast of his own. Presently it was alongside, and Wayne, turning professional eyes on its occupants, was immediately startled by the contrast between them.

In a flash he saw that the man was unusually swarthy of complexion, with coal-black hair and brows that overhung deepset, crafty eyes. More startling still was the long, fierce mustache standing rapier-like above the thick, sensuous mouth, from one side of which, extending half-way across the thin cheek, was a jagged scar.

"Military-looking brigand," was Wayne's mental judgment. "Either Italian or Mexican."

The cab drew a little ahead now, and he could obtain a better view of the other occupant—a girl of not more than twenty, of fresh and surprising attractiveness. Her figure, though slender, was full and rounded and superbly set off by a trim-fitting suit. The perfect oval of her face, shaded by a small turban, was framed by thin-spun hair as golden as the sun itself, and in his momentary examination Wayne judged that her eyes were gray.

The contrast between the two was so amazing that his speculation as to what interests they had in common was obvious. Neither spoke to the other, and he noticed that the girl sat as far away as possible from her companion.

Apparently they had no immediate mission, for the

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cab, guided by a nondescript chauffeur, was traveling as slowly and as aimlessly as his own, and Wayne guessed that they, like himself, were "out for air."

He was about to dismiss them from his mind and turn away when, with a mild start, he realized that his eyes were looking full and directly into those of the girl. For just an instant were they thus, and in that instant Wayne caught a flash of communication. A woman would have called it intuition; a mystic, second sight; a newspaperman a "hunch."

But the message was undeniable, and it was a message of personal appeal.

And now that his interest was aroused, the other cab, perversely enough, began to draw away. Instinctively, as it advanced, Wayne looked for its license-number, but the plate was so covered with mud that the numerals were not to be distinguished. Oh, well, it did not matter, and as the distance between the two cars lengthened Wayne found his interest waning.

"Too much imagination," he thought, laughing to himself.

Upon sober reflection it did seem a bit too romantic to suppose that an unknown girl, to all appearances well-to-do and perfectly able to take care of herself, should be signaling to him for any reason whatever. Doubtless her sinister-looking companion was an Italian officer honorably discharged for wounds and on a visit to Chicago, and the girl, if not actually married to him, then related by marriage.

So, with this casual explanation Wayne managed to dismiss from his mind everything about the pair except that the girl's face was one to fascinate. The next time he looked ahead the other cab was nowhere to be seen.

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The afternoon was beginning to ebb, and Wayne, realizing that he must attend to some matters at his apartments before dinner-time, gave an order to the driver and in another moment found himself again headed south. Now the car appeared to be giving trouble, even at this slow pace, for occasional sputtering noises came from beneath the hood.

"She isn't behaving well, is she?" Wayne ventured.

"Naw," sourly replied the chauffeur, "it's the gas. More 'n half water and one-fourth kerosene. It takes a good Lizzie to keep goin' on it."

"Well, stick it out. I haven't far to travel."

The author laughed as he settled back on the cushions again.

The car, after a few minutes, seemed to perform more ably and gathered speed. One by one the blocks slid by until again the German Building loomed up ahead. Wayne was about to order the driver to turn west, in which direction his apartments lay, when suddenly, not forty feet ahead of him, as if dropped there from the Heavens themselves, appeared the other car with the golden-haired girl and her swarthy companion. All his dormant interest and speculation were aroused anew and he laughed amusedly.

"Coincidence," he said to himself. "If I had wanted to trace that car I couldn't have done it in a million years."

From his point of vantage he scrutinized the two ahead of him, so turned that their profiles were visible. Certainly the girl was attractive, and equally as certainly was the man repellent. Wayne did not know why, but instinctively he mistrusted him. They were evidently exchanging short opinions now, and he saw that the girl

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was still seated as far away as possible from the military-looking fellow.

Suddenly, as though conscious of Wayne's scrutiny, she turned her face and looked back, and again after the first start of surprise in her eyes Wayne caught the vague message of appeal. Only this time it was more definite and the glance was longer. For perhaps five seconds their eyes held each other, and then the girl abruptly turned away.

Wayne's heart beat faster. Was he after all on the trail of an incident that might later be worked into a novel? Undeniably the girl had faced him deliberately, and undeniably, too, there had been purpose in her act.

At any rate, the monotony of the summer afternoon was being broken and it would do no harm to keep her in view.

The cabs still preserved the same distance between them, but in another moment Wayne's began to sputter and dropped back until the intervening space amounted to nearly a hundred feet. The girl ahead now seemed to become suddenly animated, and with one hand frequently called her companion's attention to various points of interest to the right. With a thrill Wayne realized that her free arm was stealthily attempting to fall outside the tonneau without arousing the swarthy man's attention.

Inch by inch it made its way, and when at last it was free Wayne saw clutched guardedly in the small, well-shaped hand a small leather note-book.

Now he knew! The girl was attempting to communicate with him! His "hunch" had been correct!

What her aim was did not matter just then. And as his eyes were glued to the girl's clenched hand he saw

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the fingers quickly relax and drop the note-book in the very path of his car.

His face hot with excitement, Wayne leaned forward "Stop here, just a moment," he commanded.

Obediently, the cab drew up to the curb. It was but a matter of a moment to get out, pick up the note-book and climb into the cab again:

"Stay fifty feet behind that cab ahead; the black one with the mud all over it," he commanded as he again took his seat on the cushions. Then as the car started in motion again Wayne took up examination of the note-book.

It was a tiny enough thing, one such as a woman carries in her hand-bag to jot down everything from a club woman's telephone number to the latest recipes for tomato-soup. Its binding was plain morocco without distinguishing marks. With nervous fingers Wayne thumbed the pages, looking up now and then to make certain that the cab did not get out of range.

Thumbing the pages the more undecided he became for apparently every page in the book was blank. Had the girl merely been making a fool of him? Had she thought him a bumptious young upstart with an eye to flirtations and thrown the note-book away for no other reason than to take a fall out of his conceit and have the laugh on him?

Yet he could not bring himself to believe that and painstakingly, he began at the front of the book and carefully went over each leaf. Toward the back he came upon two pages that had been folded over.

"Maybe—" he began, and eagerly flattened them out He stopped short and his fingers tightened on the page.

There was a message!

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Bending closer he examined the writing. It was in a girlish hand, apparently written in haste and with the stub of a pencil. From the first sentence to the last it gripped his interest as indeed it would have gripped the interest of any man with a streak of imagination, for this was what Wayne read:

TO THE GENTLEMAN WHO MAY READ THIS:

I do not know the date, but I have been in this house for three weeks. I do not even know where the house is, only that it is somewhere in Chicago, and on a street called "Calvert." It is, or, rather, was painted brown, and stands on a lot by itself, surrounded by a picket-fence in bad repair. It is a large, square, wooden house, two stories and a basement. I am held here a prisoner by two men and a woman. There may be others, as I have heard strange voices speak, but I have seen only these three. Two of them brought me here from Mexico, and I think their object is to rob me of a fortune left by my father. I am not yet of age, and do not wholly understand. I write this appealing to you for help. To-morrow, I am told, I shall be taken out for a motor-ride, and my only hope is that I may then be able to place this note in the hands of some person who will respond. May God guide me. Do not notify the police, as that would be useless. If you will come to the third window of the annex at midnight, I can tell you what to do; but dare not explain here. I pray this may fall into the hands of a brave man.

Pleadingly,
Z. G.

Again and again he ran through it, but yet he could not decide its purport. On its face the note was sincere enough—truth and earnestness seemed to pop out of every line—but scribbled notes dropped by bewitching young ladies from sinister black taxicabs were things for the movies, not for real life.

Yet here in an unromantic city apparently, romance

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was afoot or else he was being made a fearful chump of. At any rate, it would do no harm to follow the thing, at least temporarily, for the mere adventure of it; and still undecided as to whether to take the note seriously or not, he snapped the book shut, putting it carefully in his waistcoat-pocket. Then he looked ahead.

The girl's cab was increasing its speed, and as he watched it he saw her turn guardedly again and throw him an inquiring glance. He knew what she was asking, and nodded his head affirmatively to show her he had received the note.

Leaning ahead, he spoke to the driver:

"Can't you get more speed? They're drawing away from us."

"It's that blamed gas!" the other replied. "I'll do my best."

The cab ahead was hitting up a fair clip now, close to thirty, and Wayne's vehicle, through the driver's heroic efforts, managed to stay a rod or two behind. It was the author's idea to follow the cab to its destination, wait his opportunity, and scrape from the license-plate its cargo of mud and learn the number, after which it would be an easy matter to trace the owner.

This plan he was destined never to carry out, for the engine began to sputter again, back-fired, snorted, and finally hit on only two cylinders. Excited and disgusted, Wayne saw the girl's cab sliding away along the ribbon of the boulevard while he fell behind, unable to help himself. In a moment he had made his decision.

"Here! Take this," he yelled to the driver, tossing him a five-dollar bill as the car came to a stop. "You don't deserve it, though!"

"I'm sorry, boss—" the chauffeur began, but his words

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fell on the empty air, for Wayne had fled and was already hopping aboard another taxi.

"South!" he commanded his new driver, "and fast!"

The taxi leaped ahead, regardless of the crowded traffic. Through the windows Wayne peered anxiously for a sight of the fugitive car. To stand tiptoe on the threshold of adventure and then have the door slammed in one's face was irritating, to say the least, and he cajoled the driver to do his best.

One block, two blocks, three, six, ten. And still no trace. Wayne reasoned that going at the rate they were they would have passed the car—unless it had turned west.

It would be useless to continue patrolling the boulevards in that case, and disgust, chagrin, and disappointment mingled into one blue murk, he ordered the car north again. At Sixtieth Street he directed it westward, along which course it proceeded until it came to the quiet curb of the Cressenden, where it stopped and let out one of the most out-of-sorts young authors in all the American writing fraternity.

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CHAPTER II

A VENTURESOME RESOLUTION

After letting himself into his apartments in the Cressenden, Wayne immediately set about recasting the plot of an unsold short story. Ordinarily, when he had a task to do, the author could empty his mind of the day's odds and ends and apply it entirely to the matter at hand, but to-night he found this virtue missing; try as he did to straighten out plot, incident, and climax by the light of his writing-lamp, he failed miserably because thoughts of the girl and the day's strange occurrence came leaping into his mind like bold, unbidden guests.

Finally, too irritated to continue, he gave it up, and drawing from his pocket the morocco note-book, opened it, spread it out on the table, and for the tenth time reread the girl's message of appeal. Then pushing the book aside he lay back in the chair, stretched out his legs and looked fixedly at the ceiling, his mind a chaos of speculation.

There were at least three possible explanations for the sending of the note. First, since the girl was young, she might have been frivolous and vulgar enough to stoop to a silly boulevard flirtation; second, she might have been mildly demented and suffering from the delusion that she was being held captive—one of those numerous individuals upon whom Wayne had chanced often in his newspaper career; and, lastly, she might

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have been exactly what the note indicated she was—a perfectly normal young woman gripped in the clutch of circumstance and actually in need of help in extricating herself from an unpleasant and possibly dangerous situation.

Judicially Wayne began to consider each possibility. After some reflection he decided that the affair could not have been a common flirtation; in her glances there had been nothing of boldness, nothing of the coquette, nothing of guile, only a mute appeal; and as he recalled the youthful dignity and character of her face she did not fit into any such vulgar picture.

Pursuing the second supposition, he was by no means as certain. Girls and men to all appearances as sane as the sanest frequently labored under mild delusions, and from memory he called several instances that corroborated this reasoning. The girl might be one of these. In case she were, it would account for the presence of the dark-looking companion, who might be either physician or guardian.

And yet, as he reviewed her deliberate actions and remembered the clear gray of her eyes and the poise that he saw there, he was as loath to classify her among the insane as he was to condemn her as a flirt.

To the last premise he devoted more time and thought. Assuming that the girl was a normal young woman in distress, why had she not seized her opportunity and leaped from the cab instead of trusting to such a melodramatic effect as a hastily scribbled note which, falling into the hands of an utter stranger, might have failed signally in its mission?

And what was her relationship to the dark-skinned man? On second thought it was absurd to suppose that

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a girl, patently both well-bred and intellectual, should choose for a companion such an atrocious fellow, marked as he was with the over-indulgences of life. His first half-theory that she might in some way be related to him was rejected.

He must then be considered in the light of a guardian or, worse still, a crook. Immediately he thought of abduction and blackmail. For all he knew the girl might be rich, and held for one reason or another by this man. Perhaps in sending the note she had taken the only means at her command to inform others of her predicament. Perhaps she had been on her way to a hiding-place when the message was sent.

Wayne recalled the stealthy deliberation by which she had managed to dispatch it, and this, among other minor considerations, decided him that the appeal was an honest one. The note itself, its general tone, its appearance of having been hurriedly written and its plea both direct and honest, yet freighted with mystery, corroborated his belief.

"It *must* be on the level," he muttered as he rose and began pacing the floor.

It had been written out of fear in heart. Of that he was certain. Further, she had taken a desperate chance in dropping it from the cab in the hope that it would fall into the hands of one who would both understand and be courageous. As to the man with the black mustache, Wayne, recalling the ferretlike, glittering eyes, the cruel mouth, the talonlike hands, felt that whatever his interest in the young woman was it would bring her no good.

And strangely enough he felt a burning anger toward the fellow.

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But why had she signed herself "Z. G."? Why had she not given him at least her name as a clew to work on? That would have relieved the note of some of its melodrama.

Not that he any longer doubted the sincerity of the message, for experience had taught him that even in the commonplaces of everyday life there is sometimes melodrama of the most marked variety.

Not a real working clew on which to proceed! Again he cursed the balky engine which, that afternoon, had destroyed his chances of following the girl's cab and finding out its license-number. With this one bit of evidence in hand he felt sure that he would have been able to proceed far enough within a few hours to determine whether the whole affair was one to be taken seriously or as some atrocious farce.

He walked the room restlessly, the note lying open on his desk, his glance seeking it every time he turned. What should he do? What steps ought he to take?

The answer was not an easy one. The young man was no adventurer; his life heretofore had been rather ordinary and commonplace, although his long newspaper training had brought with it self-reliance, and a knowledge that truth is often stranger than fiction.

If he had not seen her, if he had not felt the charm of her presence and read the appeal in her eyes, he might even now have dismissed the whole matter with a cynical laugh.

But under the circumstances this was impossible. She positively had called to him, and he felt that he would prove himself a cur if he failed to respond.

But how? Should he go alone? Surely there would be no great risk assumed in merely searching for and

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locating the house or even in endeavoring thus to obtain conversation with the girl. In such an attempt he would run no greater peril than he had often assumed in tracing down some sensational newspaper story.

It was scarcely probable she would have suggested his coming, unless she deemed it reasonably safe. For her own sake she must naturally feel assured as to that. And there must be a reason why she hesitated to inform the police—the conspirators might be in league with them; or, she had been led to believe so.

He thought over the list of his acquaintances in the city, but it was only at the name of Bob Carlton that he hesitated. None of the others would do. In the first place, he did not know them sufficiently well.

But Bob might answer, for he was a fellow who rather enjoyed risking his neck in any unbelievable way, and besides could be trusted to hold his tongue. Wayne picked up the telephone-receiver, and called a number.

"Yes, central, Lakeside, 4463, please—hello, are these Mr. Carlton's apartments? They are? What is that? —oh, yes, you are his valet. To Lake Forest for the week's end. Why, I was with him at lunch; yes, this is Stuart Wayne. Oh, Blatchford took him home with him —I see; and he will not be in the city again until Tuesday? No, I'll not disturb him; that's all."

He hung up, and sat there in silence, his chin cupped in his hand, thinking the situation all over again. He was disappointed about Bob, yet somehow the disappointment only served to strengthen his own resolve.

It made no great amount of difference, this failure to enlist Carlton; he really had no intention of essaying any more than scouting around a bit at first anyway. Later, if needed, he could call upon some friend for as-

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sistance; but likely enough the whole affair would prove to be a farce of some kind. If it did so develop he preferred being the sole victim.

Even as he turned this conception over in his mind his idle fingers had, almost unconsciously, picked up a pencil and began sketching a face on a blank sheet of copy-paper. He stared now in surprise at the result, and then burst into a laugh—it was a rude, vivid outline of the girl's face, exactly as it clung tenaciously to his memory—the rounded throat and chin, the rebellious strands of blond hair, the wide-open, questioning eyes.

The laugh ceased as he looked at the sketch; somehow the face pleaded with him, pictured an appeal. His eyes hardened into purpose, and his clenched hand struck the top of the desk.

"I'll do it!" he exclaimed to himself in final decision. "What's the odds? There may be the genesis of a plot in this, if nothing more.

"Let me see—Calvert Street; Calvert? I never knew there was any such place in the city. The best thing for me to do is dine at the club, and then ask the doorman. If he doesn't know he can look it up."

The doorman had to look it up, confessing frankly that he had no recollection of the name; no more did the two or three chauffeurs within reach of the entrance; nor was it to be found later in the pages of the city directory.

By this time, however, the doorman himself had become interested in the quest, and called up the telephone office for information. Thus it was learned that what had formerly been known as Odell Place had lately been rechristened Calvert Street—did he know where that was? The door-man did, and he proceeded graphically to outline his knowledge to Wayne.

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"It's a way out southwest, sir," he explained. "I haven't been there for three or four years; an' can't say as I have any wish to go again."

"Not a very respectable neighborhood, you mean!"

"Oh, it's respectable enough, so far as I know, but almighty lonely. It wasn't never settled up much; the street ain't more than three or four blocks long—is it, Dan?

"And I don't believe there's more than that number houses along it; all of 'em old places, gone to seed."

His eyes grew reminiscent.

"Why, come to think of it, one of 'em must have been the old Hartigan house—you've heard about him, haven't you, Mr. Wayne?"

The young man shook his head, but waited, anxious to learn all that he could regarding the neighborhood.

"I thought maybe you did, as you was a newspaper-man," resumed the doorman, not averse to hearing his own voice. "Well, when I was a kid that was all open prairie out there, except for this Hartigan place.

"He was a big gambler in those days, and kept a string of race-horses. He trained 'em out there; had a private track, an' us boys used to hike out to see 'em run.

"Hartigan was murdered there one night, an' then, not long after, his widow sold the place. I'd plumb forgot all about that affair for years."

"What sort of a looking house was it, Carney?"

"Big, square, wooden house; must have had fourteen or fifteen rooms in it. We thought it was a whale in them days. Hartigan kept it painted white while he lived there, but it is more than twenty years since he died."

"Who killed him?"

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"Nobody ever know'd; he was found one morning with a knife in his heart. A gamblers' row, I reckon."

"Do you recall anything resembling an annex to this Hartigan place?"

"Yes," and Carney scratched his head thoughtfully. "Come to think of it, I guess there was, a sort of kitchen ell, built on at the rear, with an upper story, where the help slept. It strikes me this was added on later, as Hartigan had to employ more people out there with his horses. Us boys never hung around there much after Hartigan was killed, for everybody said the place was haunted.

"I never took much stock in that, Mr. Wayne, but nobody lived there for a long while, and it was almighty eery looking. The house sorter went to pieces, and the yard grew up into weeds.

"Then, a little later, a gang of counterfeiters made their headquarters out there. Finally the Secret Service got after them, and there was a dickens of a fight in the front room—same place that they found Hartigan's body—and a man or two got hurt.

"Seems to me one of 'em died. After that you couldn't get a kid to go within a hundred yards of the house; and I don't know what's become of it."

"Except that it still stands, out there on Calvert Street?"

"Oh, it's probably there, all right. I saw it maybe three years ago, but don't think anybody was living in it then; the front windows was all boarded up.

"There was an awful lot of shrubbery between the house and the street, pretty near as dense as a woods. Gosh, sir, I wouldn't live there for a fortune."

"How do you get out to Calvert?"

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"You wouldn't want to take a taxi?"

"No."

"Well, then, the best way would be a Madison car, as far as Western Avenue, and then transfer south. Go till you come to Caspar, and then walk west three blocks. That will bring you to Calvert.

"You are not liable to find any cement walks out there; and street lights ain't any too numerous. I'd take the trip in the daytime, if I was you."

"All right, Carney; thanks. I rather think so myself."

Wayne ate his dinner slowly, seated alone at a small table. There were a few familiar faces in the room, but none that he felt any desire to companion with at that time.

Strange as it may seem, Carney's description of the deserted Hartigan house, and its surroundings, only served to strengthen the younger man's resolution, and increase his faith in the truth of the girl's note. Everything appeared to coincide, and he no longer had doubt but what this old home of the murdered gambler was the place of her imprisonment.

It seemed peculiarly adapted to the purpose. It was isolated, avoided, a house long associated in the public mind with crime—an ideal spot for concealment. Perhaps in the entire city no other place could be found wherein conspirators might hide with such assurance of safety, with such certainty of avoiding the observation of the police.

He would in many ways prefer making his first visit by daylight, yet probably a trip there at night, under cover of darkness, would be the safer experiment.

Then the girl had pledged herself to watch for him,

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and would be greatly disappointed if he failed to appear. She would naturally believe he lacked courage, and might not expect him again. Besides, it was altogether likely that she knew the best hour for an approach to the house; the particular time when his loitering about would be least likely to be observed.

He regretted not having brought a revolver with him; however, the weapon would scarcely be needed, as his only purpose at present was to attempt a cautious survey of the building from without, and, if conditions justified, communicate with the prisoner. Apparently there was no reason why he should encounter any one, or be required to defend himself from attack.

The adventure, as thus outlined in his mind, was, indeed, rather attractive, and he finished his meal in a spirit of cheerfulness, finally indulging in a glass of wine and a carefully selected cigar. Watching the smoke-wreaths, he smiled at discovering the girl's face revealed in memory, finding it even more alluring than ever.

He wondered what her name could be, concealed behind those unusual initials, Z. G. It was considerably after nine before he thought to glance at his watch, and hurriedly left the club.

The Western Avenue car, caught at the intersection of Madison Street, was well filled, and Wayne dropped into a rear seat, feeling no great interest in his fellow passengers. Many of these disembarked during the next few blocks, so that when they approached the more sparsely settled regions only a comparatively few remained aboard. The vacancies occurring finally permitted Wayne's attention to become attracted toward two men, seated together near the front end.

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The one next the aisle was apparently young, but built like a bull, his round head supported upon a short, thick neck, and his broad, heavy shoulders occupying at least two-thirds of the seat. Indeed, it had been the noticeable massiveness of the fellow which originally aroused interest; and it was not until his companion turned half-way around in an effort to peer out through the dark window that Wayne became suspicious of his identity.

Then he recognized him instantly as the same swarthy individual who had accompanied the girl that afternoon in her ride through Jackson Park.

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CHAPTER III

FAITH BECOMES KNOWLEDGE

The fellow made no effort to glance behind him, apparently having no fear of being followed. He exchanged a few words with his heavily built companion, and the latter flattened his nose against the glass of the window in an endeavor to see without. Some familiar landmark must have been perceived, for both men settled back in their seats, evidently satisfied that they were still some distance from their destination.

Wayne had no reason to imagine that the Mexican—for such he now believed the swarthy stranger to be—had observed him in the park, or that there was the slightest danger of his recognition. Yet such a possibility existed; the two strollers had passed his bench several times, and the man might, of course, retain a vague recollection of his features, enough to arouse suspicion if they were again to encounter each other on this West Side car.

The safer plan surely would be to keep entirely out of sight. Deciding on this course the young man slipped quietly from his place, retreating to join the conductor in the rear vestibule.

"Want to get off at Carlyle?" the latter asked, his hand on the bell-cord.

"No; I'm new down this way, and came out to ask a question or two. How far are we from Caspar?"

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"Something over a quarter of a mile; want to get off there?"

"The street this side; I've forgotten the name."

"Johnston; but there ain't no houses anywhere about there—the nearest is two blocks south. I don't believe I've put off no passengers at Johnston fer six months. Where was yer aimin' ter go to, may I ask?"

"Calvert; my friend told me I'd have no trouble if I walked straight down Johnston."

"Well, maybe yer won't; but mostly them that go there get off at Caspar—it's nearer. Do yer see them two guys ahead, second seat from the front? That's where they get off; they been ridin' with me now for about two weeks, pretty regular."

"Do they live on Calvert?"

"Sure thing. They come out on my car first time one afternoon, when they'd just got off the train, I guess, for they had quite a few grips along. There was four in the party—them two and a couple of women.

"One of the females was about thirty-five, not such a bad-looker, and dressed to kill, sorter stout built. The other struck me as bein' a young girl, but she had a heavy veil on, and I couldn't see her face. I've seen her since, though."

"You have? Does she ride with you often?"

"No, she ain't never been with me since till to-day. It was my first trip this afternoon. She and that dark guy up there got on at Madison—hopped out of a taxi and into the car just as I pulled the cord. They'd been riding around down-town, I guess, but didn't have no bundles.

"She was a mighty pretty girl, let me tell you, a real blonde, not one of yer peroxid make-believes.

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"Gosh! But she did sure stack up white an' clean alongside that foreigner. I don't know just what to make of them two; they didn't hardly speak to each other all the way out, and when they did it wasn't in any language ever I heard before."

"Spanish, likely, or Italian; he looks like it."

"Maybe it was; all I know is 'twa'n't neither German nor Swede."

"And you say they got off at Caspar? What makes you think they live on Calvert?"

" 'Cause that big-necked guy came back and asked me some questions that first trip. That's what interested me mostly. He wanted to know where was the old Hartigan house—"

"You mean Hartigan, the gambler? Did he used to live out this way?"

"He certainly did—but that was a long time ago. He was killed out here—you remember that, don't you? No; well, maybe that happened before your time. I wasn't much more than a boy then myself.

"There wasn't no streets, and no carline out here then; but the house is still standing, over on what they call Calvert now. Far as I know 'tain't been lived in much since, leastwise not since the police cleaned out 'Red' Dugan's gang what made it headquarters; but I guess this outfit must be stopping there now, from what little I got out of them. I never got to talk none with that dark fellow, and the big guy don't say much. If you ask him any questions he shuts up like a clam."

"Is the house furnished?"

"Left just as it was when old Hartigan croaked, they tell me. Somebody said it was sold shortly after, but nobody ever took possession, so maybe the deal fell

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through. The widow moved down-town, but she didn't live more than a year.

"They had one son, rather a wild one; a few years ago he was running a saloon dive somewhere in the Loop; then he got into trouble with the police and had to skip. That's the last I heard of him."

"Then this younger Hartigan still owns the property?"

"I guess so; he couldn't never sell it," cheerfully replied the conductor, evidently enjoying some one to talk with, "unless he unloaded it on a mortgage, and 'tain't likely any one would put up much on that kind of a deal.

"There ain't no value to real estate in this neighborhood. I bought a lot out here six years ago, and, blame me, if I can even give it away. Johnston is the next street, if you aim to get off there."

"All right; you needn't stop; I'm a railroad man—good night to you."

A small incandescent glowed at the corner, lighting dimly a small fraction of the street. Wayne swung off easily, however, and watched the rattling car disappear into the darkness beyond.

It was a gloomy spot enough in which he found himself, realized from a single, swift glance about. He could scarcely believe it possible that he was still well within the city limits. A bare expanse of unoccupied prairie extending in every direction, without so much as the outline of a house visible, nothing, indeed, but a slightly darker shadow at his right, marking a line of scraggly trees along one side of the street.

His best course appeared to be to follow the car-track, and he struck out in that direction, with eyes watchfully

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fixed on the bobbing light of the car he had just left. It would stop at Caspar to discharge those two passengers, and it was his plan to permit them to disappear toward Calvert without their suspicioning any other presence. This was why he had leaped from the step at Johnston Street without asking the conductor to pull the cord. He felt confident the action had been accomplished without attracting any attention, and that he could now shadow the two with no great peril of discovery.

Wayne had reason to feel that his chance conversation with the loquacious conductor had been a most fortunate one. He had learned much of value, and knew better how to proceed; moreover, he was strengthened in his determination.

What he had been told not only served to corroborate the truth of the girl's letter, but had definitely narrowed his search to the old Hartigan house. Consequently his personal interest in the affair, as well as the solving of the mystery, was appreciably increased. He no longer had any intention of returning without learning more. His future actions were not to be based on mere idle curiosity, but would result in most careful investigation.

Already he was convinced that he had invaded the atmosphere of crime, and that there rested upon him a distinct duty to perform. This knowledge left him more wary and cautious, for the affair promised to prove a far more serious matter than he had anticipated, and might require the exercise of qualities other than a mere reckless bravado.

He sincerely regretted having ventured into such a neighborhood unarmed, and alone. Why, he had not even left a message behind, explaining his disappearance.

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If anything should happen to prevent his return no friend would have the faintest conception as to what had become of him—unless Carney might chance to recall his questioning at the club.

However, he would take no chances of that to-night. He determined to make no serious effort to communicate with the young woman; that would be too dangerous. She might think he had failed her; that her note of appeal had fallen into unworthy hands, but he could not help that.

She would learn the truth about his efforts later, and be equally thankful. The thing for him to do now—the only reasonable, safe thing—was to locate the house positively, and gain some information as to its surroundings. He could accomplish this without any particular peril; and then, to-morrow, he would get hold of Carlton, and they would decide together on the next step.

No, not Carlton, he was too rattle-headed—Dan Stiles would be a far better man for such a job. Wayne knew that he was connected in some way with the government's crime detection system, and this would be right in his line. Wayne wondered why he had not thought of Stiles before.

These thoughts flashed through his mind disconnectedly as he stumbled forward. The night was intensely black, the only lights being at the street intersections, where their feeble gleams were scarcely distinguishable. The only sound reaching him was the vanishing rattle of the street-car; the loneliness was intense and depressing. He distinguished the grinding of a brake as the car approached Caspar, and waited motionless, staring through the gloom ahead.

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In the dim blending of lights his eyes were barely able to make out the shapeless shadows of the two men as they descended the car-step and vanished into the surrounding darkness. Then the bell tinkled twice, and the car sped on.

Wayne waited where he was for a moment, breathlessly listening, endeavoring to assure himself as to the exact direction the men had taken. He heard one of them swear in English, following a muffled blow, as though an incautious foot had in the gloom encountered some obstacle—then all was silence. Clearly enough the two had vanished up the unseen road to the right.

Confident of this, Wayne moved over toward the bank, and began a cautious advance, keeping well hidden within its darker shadow. Except for the fact that a miserable incandescent sputtered at that point, emitting scarcely more radiance than a firefly, he never would have been aware of the presence of Caspar Street.

There were no fences, and when by sense of feeling alone, he succeeded in locating the road, a few traces of wheels were so completely obscured by grass as to render following them a most difficult undertaking. It had to be done, however, and he made the effort.

They led up a slight embankment, while beyond this the country ahead appeared open and flat. There were no lights to serve as guides, but he imagined that he saw a grove of trees, irregularly outlined against the slightly lighter sky. The two men must necessarily have gone this way, but were already so far in advance that no sound of their progress reached him.

Their knowledge of the route, which they had traversed on other nights equally dark, enabled them to proceed rapidly. The solemn, eery silence caused

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Wayne's heart to beat fiercely, yet only led to the hesitation of a moment.

He was too old in experience to be afraid of the dark, and now that he had ventured this far had no intention of retreating until he had learned more. He stood erect, and began advancing slowly, feeling his way through the darkness, seeking to trace the faint wheel-tracks, venturing only a step at a time.

The short grass under foot was slightly wet, as though from a heavy fall of dew, and he advanced so slowly and silently as to hear his own breathing. No sound from those before reached his ears; they must be further ahead than he had supposed, yet he dared not quicken his pace. All about was so black and formless that he had by this time lost every sense of direction, and could only blindly follow the faint wagon-tracks.

Yet each step served to define more clearly that ragged grove of trees to the left of the road. He became assured that it really was a patch of timber, could even trace its extent, and before he finally attained its black shadow, his searching eyes detected evidence of a rude fence. He was, however, compelled to turn aside to fully convince himself of this—feeling with his hand.

It was a mere remnant, originally picket, but these had largely disappeared, the stouter frame-work alone remaining, the supporting-posts sagging from rottenness. This reminder of better days bordered the road, while beyond it were a few well-grown trees, and a perfect tangle of underbrush.

There was no evidence of any house, however, nor a gleam of light showing the near presence of a dwelling. The black, silent wood only rendered the surroundings more somber and desolate. He pressed on along the line

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of fence, seeking some opening, some semblance of a path.

Suddenly he stopped, clutching convulsively at the wooden rail beside him, and as instantly sinking low into the depth of shadow. There was some movement perceptible, although obscure and ill-defined, just in front.

He heard a muttered oath, a swift motion, a half-smothered exclamation, and the dull thud of a blow, followed by what sounded like the fall of a body.

There was an instant of intense silence, broken finally by a startled voice speaking in broken English.

"Vat vas eet you do, Cowan? Who you heet—vat?"

Some one laughed, a mere mumble between the teeth.

"Darned if I know, Don," grumbled a deep voice doubtfully. "A feller stepped out of the gate yere right inter me. I reckon he never heered us comin'. I just nat'rally poked him one, an' it muster been a knockout, fer he sure dropped sudden."

"He come by ze gate?"

"Yep; in the shadder o' the post yere. I didn't ask no questions, but just whaled away. Got a match? Let's have a look at the cuss."

"A match? No! Eet light up, an' be seen. Nevair! Vat ze man do here—hey? You zink he be alone?"

"How do I know?" disgustedly. "Maybe if I saw his face I could tell. What's the use o' bein' so scared, Don? Nobody knows enything 'bout us. Let's have a look at the fellow."

"Zat vas eet; nobody know; nobody best know. Vy you so sure nobody know—hey? Vat bring ze feller here in ze night? You anzer me zat. He come for ze valk? For ze night air?

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"Bah, 'tis not ze truth. Somewhere zar is ze leak. I like eet not at all—no! Vat you zay ve do?"

"Why, lug the guy inside and have a look at him—we can't leave him lying here."

"You t'ink maybe he dead?"

The other rose up from his knees, a huge, shapeless figure.

"Dead? Naw! It was just a knockout. I got him square on the chin, by luck, but hit him with my fist.

"Come on, Don, and lay hold. I wanter glimpse the guy's looks. I know most o' the fly-cops in this town, an' what their graft is. When the feller comes to we'll give him the third degree."

"Ze vat, you zay?"

"Oh, a good turn-over; make him tell what brought him out here. I'll know how to make the guy talk."

"Vare ve take heem?"

"Any place inside; what's the dif'? He can't get out until we say so, can he? In another day or two we make our getaway."

"But," the other protested, "if ze man vas not alone? Vat zen? You vould reesk too much."

"Risk! We've got to risk. See here, Almerido, ain't I inter this yere job as deep as you be? Ain't I? Don't I know the stake we're playin' fer? An' whut it's goin' ter mean if we git caught afore the time is up? Don't I?

"Now listen—it's all right ter be cautious, just so long as you can be; but sometimes the other sorter thing pays best. We've been here a month under cover, layin' wires, an' gettin' ready. So far as we know nobody has suspicioned us, an' the police don't even know yet that

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we are in this town. There ain't been nobody watchin' us—has there?"

"Eet is vat you say—*si*," admitted the Mexican as this direct question was flung at him. "Not till zis man come, I haf no fear."

"Exactly. Now we run into this guy snoopin' about in the dark. We don't know who he is; but it's a damn sight safer to hold him than to let him go. He'd talk now, wouldn't he, whatever his purpose was? Then we've got to shut him up.

"I tell you, Don, the feller's here alone; if he'd had had a partner we'd 'a' heard from him afore this. However, I'll beat these bushes, if that 'll make you feel any easier; but the first thing for us to do is git this guy under cover, and as soon as his senses return, pump his story out o' him.

"Once we know what brought him here, then we'll know what to do. That's good sense, ain't it?"

The other was silent, evidently impressed by the force of this argument, even if not wholly satisfied.

"What in thunder did I ever tie up with such a white-livered cuss for?" the big fellow growled in undisguised disgust. "How did your kind ever think up a scheme like this enyhow? You've been scared half to death at every shadder since we struck this town."

"Eet iss not my countree; I feel not et home here; I know not ze vays ov ze peoples," the Mexican apologized. "Ef eet be Mexico I lead; I tell you zen vat to do. Eet is not zat I fear—no; but ze peril of meestake, of ze wrong step. *Señor*, I fight; 'tis often I fight; no one call Juan Almerido ze coward."

"No, I reckon not; I heard all about you in El Paso.

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That's why I tied up with you on this job. Come on then; let's lug the fellow inside."

"You zink maybe he be a detective?"

"No, I don't. It is my hunch he is some nosy guy who has found out that some one is livin' in this house, and is just snoopin' round to see what's goin' on. He'd be a fine fly-cop to walk right into me like that.

"Take hold, will you? If we keep on arguin' here this buck will come to, and likely start another row—that's it, pick up his legs."

The two ill-defined figures faded entirely out of view, bearing their sagging burden, and Wayne could hear the diminishing sound of their feet shuffling along on what was apparently a cinder-path. As soon as he dared to venture he stole forward as far as the gate, and a moment later had slipped within the enclosure.

The path was easily located, but in advancing he chose to deaden his footsteps by walking on the short grass. The dense shadow of the tangled underbrush suddenly came to an end, revealing an open space beyond.

Ordinarily this would have seemed dark enough, but now appeared almost light to his eyes accustomed to that deeper gloom through which he had been creeping. Stooping low to the earth he was able to perceive a faint outline of the house, and the shapeless figures of the two men bearing their burden toward it.

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CHAPTER IV

DRAWN ON BY FATE

If any doubt still lingered in Wayne's mind that he was upon the trail of a crime of some magnitude it vanished as he crouched there in the deep shadow of those bushes, watching the two men approach that silent house with their unconscious burden.

He had already heard enough, witnessed enough, to satisfy himself on this point. What the crime might be, its nature, and method of execution, remained unsolved; but that it was no common, ordinary affair was already sufficiently clear. Nor did he longer hesitate as to his duty.

His thought leaped from point to point swiftly—the girl prisoner with her pitiful appeal for aid; her vague explanation that this was the result of a conspiracy to rob her of a fortune; the statement that she had been brought to this house from Mexico; the choosing of such a spot for concealment, this abandoned residence of the murdered Hartigan, reputed to be haunted, as headquarters for the gang; their secrecy and fear of the police; Cowan's unknowing acknowledgment that the desperate scheme had originated in the brain of the Mexican, and that he had first become connected with it at El Paso—all these things combined to yield him a fresh view-point, a new conception of its importance.

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Yet in no way did these facts, even when woven together, solve the mystery. Who was the young woman? In what form was this property which these men plotted to secure? Was their scheme one of mere fraud, or did it contemplate even murder? What connecting link existed between Chicago and far-off Mexico?

Wayne rather prided himself on his swift judgment of men—his newspaper experience had given him an accurate insight into character, which in the past had seldom deceived him. He had seen these two, heard their voices, and now instinctively catalogued them.

To his mind the Mexican was far the more dangerous—a scheming, cold-blooded villain, treacherous and vindictive. The other—Cowan—was of a vastly different type, adventurous, and relying on brute strength; possessing, to be sure, a certain degree of low cunning, but with more faith in a blow than in words.

It was probable that this fellow had been picked up by Almerido because of his intimate knowledge of Chicago, and his acquaintance with the police. Probably he was responsible for their selection of this house in which to conceal themselves. Of the two he would be far more likely to do the strong-arm work, if anything of that nature was contemplated.

Wayne recalled the short, thick neck, the immense breadth of the man's shoulders, and the slight glimpse he had obtained in the car of the fellow's face. That he was very largely brute was sufficiently clear, while a strangely misshapen ear spoke eloquently of past experience in the prize-ring.

His fist blow must be a deadly one—no wonder the man he struck had gone down as though poleaxed. If he had landed right the chances were he would have

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broken the fellow's neck; indeed it was not altogether impossible that he had.

With these reflections the full seriousness of his own position came to Wayne with renewed force—he knew now something of what he was pitted against. Manifestly it was to be no boys' play. Whatever these villains contemplated, it was of sufficient importance and danger to render them desperate and reckless in their methods.

They might not have deliberately planned murder, yet they would have no great hesitancy in committing it, if necessary to achieve their ends, or to prevent detection.

And he was there alone, unarmed, and had left behind no message as to where he had gone. His mysterious disappearance would leave scarcely a ripple. He knew he had been a fool to enter blindly on such a quest; it had been a mere quixotic attempt on his part to appear gallant and discover the truth or falsity of the girl's note.

He had had no other object in mind; her memory had spurred him into action against his calmer judgment. He had thought only of her—of the appeal in her eyes—and given no heed to consequences.

Indeed, until within the last half-hour, the affair had not appeared to him as a really serious one—as one involving any grave issues, or exposing him to any particular peril. He had thought of the girl as probably coerced by relatives, who were, perhaps, endeavoring to force her into some action which she did not desire to take—a mere family affair.

Quite possibly she had an entirely wrong view of the matter, and had become unduly excited and fearful. His one idea had been simply to go to her with words of

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comfort and advice; perhaps, if occasion warranted, even to offer his assistance in some way.

Beyond this he possessed no purpose of interfering; and he had been influenced to take this step only because of the peculiar interest she had aroused by her personal attraction.

The earliest actual suspicion that he was becoming deeply involved in a really serious affair—in the solution and baffling of a crime—came through his chance conversation with the loquacious street-car conductor, and his subsequent observation of these two men. Their appearance alone was sufficient to convince him, not only that they were capable of evil deeds, but also that they could have no possible family connections with the young woman whose frantic plea he had answered.

Moreover, their effort at concealment, the conversation between them that he had overheard, were proofs positive that their purposes were illegal, undoubtedly criminal. Almost without warning he found himself plunged into the maelstrom of some strange crime, the deep mystery of which he must attempt to solve, or else deliberately desert to her fate this helpless girl, who, in desperation, had turned to him, an unknown stranger, for assistance.

No thought of accepting this latter alternative once occurred to Wayne. Indeed, he was of a nature fascinated by danger, and inspired by such a demand upon courage. Even if he had never seen the girl her piteous appeal to his sense of chivalry would have led him to take action on her behalf; but he had seen her, had gained one glimpse into the depths of her eyes, and now that memory remained, fresh and inspiring, urging him forward with strange, compelling insistence.

He was not a man easily impressed, and had generally

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felt, hitherto, rather indifferent toward the opposite sex. He could not now define exactly what it was which had so swiftly attracted him in this instance—but, nevertheless, he knew already that nothing in life would satisfy him as would a second meeting with this girl, who had come so suddenly and unexpectedly within his circle of existence.

Whoever she was, he must know her, serve her, prove to her the depth of his manhood. This was ordained of fate.

From where he crouched at the edge of the underbrush he could not perceive clearly all that was taking place against the black shadow of the distant house. The burden the two men carried must have been a heavy one, for once they paused, leaving the man's body lying upon the ground.

The Mexican, distinguishable even in that darkness because of his slender figure, remaining standing motionless, until Cowan, rather roughly, again urged him to the task. The three disappeared entirely on attaining the front steps, seeming to vanish mysteriously in the gloom.

Wayne, confident of being beyond observation, rose silently to his feet and bent forward in an effort to follow their movements, yet was unable to discern what had become of them. Surely they had not mounted the steps; nor had they rounded the corner of the house. He could not have failed to observe them in either case. The only explanation was a basement door, somewhere beneath the front entrance.

If this was the truth, then it must have opened silently, and into utter darkness; for there had been no sound perceptible, no click of a lock, or creaking of

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hinge, no rapping for admittance, nor had any sudden gleam of light flashed forth. The two men, bearing between them the apparently lifeless body, had simply melted away as completely as though they had sunk into the ground.

Assured, at last, that they were indeed gone, Wayne stole along the outer edge of the underbrush, keeping well under cover, until the entire front of the house became exposed to view, together with a large portion of one side.

It was a building of no mean dimensions, no doubt quite pretentious when erected in that sparsely settled neighborhood, but now plainly exhibiting, even under the mantle of darkness, the evidences of long neglect and decay. It was big, square and ugly, with a hip-roof, and an ell at the rear, rendered even more somber and desolate in appearance by dark-colored paint.

Whatever degree of wealth its original owners may have possessed they were certainly not endowed with any delicacy of taste, and the place represented utility rather than beauty or cheerfulness. While it might be commodious enough within, and conveniently arranged, without it resembled a huge barn, its only attempt at ornamentation being a rather fanciful veranda, extending entirely across the front.

It stood there, within that surrounding thicket of undergrowth, gloomy and silent, to all outward appearance completely deserted. Not a gleam of light stole forth from any window; nor was the slightest evidence that the place was inhabited visible.

If Wayne had not seen with his own eyes those two men disappear amid the shadows of the front steps he would have been convinced that the house was unoc-

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cupied, and had been in that condition for years. In a star-ray he looked at the face of his watch and waited. Surely those within would not now long remain in darkness; they would desire to examine the injured man and ascertain the meaning of his presence; and besides, Cowan had expressed a determination to explore the yard.

But the minutes passed and nothing occurred—the windows exhibited no glow within; there was not the slightest sound of movement. This continued suspense was more than Wayne could bear.

Better to make a mistake than lie there long in inaction. At least he would attempt to assure himself that the injured man had really been taken within.

A line of neglected currant bushes, scraggly and growing into each other, furnished him with partial protection, and within their shadows he crept forward on hands and knees. Not until he was close in, almost at reaching distance, did he begin to comprehend why there was an absence of light—the basement windows were boarded up tightly, and those of the first floor thoroughly protected by strong wooden shutters, all carefully closed.

He could not determine the condition above, but from all appearances the entire house might be a blaze of light within, and yet from outside seem utterly deserted. However, these tightly closed shutters were equally a protection to his movements, and, indeed, even if some watcher chanced to be at an upper window, he was not likely to be detected in the shadow of the building.

He hesitated whether to investigate the back or front of the house first. The girl's note had intimated that she was confined in the annex, but Wayne felt constrained to determine definitely, before he sought com-

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munication with her, exactly what had become of Cowan and the Mexican. He had no reasonable assurance of being safe from discovery unless they were both within.

The suspicion that one, at least, might have remained without on watch, determined him upon making a cautious examination of the space beneath the front steps, where they had disappeared.

The broad veranda, elevated on brick piers, with a remnant of lattice work between, compelled a rather wide détour, but his passage was unhalted, and a thick growth of weeds served to shield his progress from observation. The steps leading down into the areaway were of wood, one being gone entirely and another badly rotted.

Once beneath the porch he found himself plunged into a darkness so intense as to be compelled to feel his way inch by inch with extended hands. It was a bricked-up passage, the floor and sides damp to the touch, and led to a rather wide door, opening directly into the basement.

While the door itself was of solid wood, there were narrow glass panels at either side; but as no light streamed through these Wayne concluded they must be heavily draped. Fearful of making a misstep, he waited breathlessly, listening for the faintest sound from within, but hearing nothing.

The gloomy silence and apparent desolation of the house added immeasurably to its horror. The knowledge that it was occupied; that somewhere, probably within a very few feet of where he stood, were human beings, criminals hiding from the law, men desperate enough to commit murder, not only rendered his presence pre-

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carious, but brought to him a feeling of dread such as he had seldom felt.

He could feel his flesh prickle, and hear the throb of his heart. For an instant his courage failed. Why should he attempt to learn more or advance further? After all, what was it to him that he should risk his life so uselessly?

He experienced an eagerness to get away—to flee from this black, haunted house; in the silence and mystery all reckless daring seemed to ooze away, and his nerve failed. A species of pride alone held him there a moment longer, his fingers groping blindly for the lock.

He found it at last, merely an ordinary knob, and even as his hand grasped it he realized with a shock that the door was not even closed, but stood slightly ajar.

The surprise of this discovery startled Wayne into sudden mental reaction. Then, of course, there was no light within. Whether or not this basement door led to a room or a hallway it must be unoccupied, unused.

Through some neglect or oversight the two men, bearing between them their heavy burden, had failed to close and secure this outer door as they passed. But they had not paused in that part of the house; they had gone on with the unconscious man into some distant apartment, where they could safely use a light. This was why no gleam had revealed their entrance; no light was permitted where it could by any possibility be observed from without.

Then the room or hall directly within would be unoccupied, free for his exploration. Slowly, cautiously,

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he pressed the door open, staring into the dense blackness beyond. The hinges made no noise; not the slightest sound warned of lurking danger, or revealed any presence within.

Scarcely venturing to draw breath, he crept silently through the narrow opening, closed partially the door behind him, and stood motionless in that intense blackness.

It was a narrow hallway in which he found himself, not exceeding six or seven feet in width, with plastered walls. The touch of his fingers revealed this fact, and also an opening at his left, a doorway enclosed, the vacancy beyond concealed in darkness.

He advanced slowly, making not the slightest noise himself, and hearing no sound to create alarm. Once he paused, startled, his heart thumping; but it was only the distant gnawing of a rat, the intense silence rendering it plainly audible. A moment later his cautiously groping foot touched the lower step of a stairway, and his hand determined its formation—rude wooden steps with a strong side rail leading up steeply to the floor above.

He was tempted to creep up these and learn what might be at the top, but felt it safer first to explore more carefully the secrets of the basement. In this task, however, Wayne felt already more at ease, confident that he was alone; that these lower rooms were not in use. He discovered another opening to his right, opposite the stairs, and felt about within, satisfying himself that it was merely an ordinary cellar apartment, containing nothing except dirt and cobwebs.

He had again returned to the hall when the brooding silence was suddenly broken by the sharp click of a

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latch above; while almost at the same instant a gleam of yellow light streamed down the steps, illuminating the space between stairway and door. Like a ghost the startled intruder slipped back into the concealing shadows beneath the protection of the stairs, which creaked noisily under the weight of a heavy tread.

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CHAPTER V

LIFTING THE VEIL

The fellow descended slowly, as though somewhat doubtful of the strength of the stairs, while the shadow of his hand grasping the side rail was clearly outlined against the wall. The lamp flickered to his rather unsteady movements, but the radius of light widened, revealing the narrow hallway, and the plastered walls on either side.

Wayne, completely cut off from any possible escape, huddled down into his black corner, scarcely venturing to breathe. The newcomer must have nearly attained the lower step, when a sudden gust of air extinguished the light and left him in utter darkness.

An oath, unmistakably in Cowan's voice, expressed the measure of his disgust; then he struck a match, which flickered for an instant, and also puffed out.

"What the deuce!" he ejaculated, completely losing his temper. "Well, if that cursed door ain't open! Hey, there, Almerido, bring a light here, will you? Of all the blame fools—you forgot to shut this door."

There was the faint sound of movement above, a dim gleam of light, followed by an answering voice.

"You call me? Vat iss eet?"

"The door was left open when we brought that guy in, and my lamp has gone out. Can that laughin'!

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Hold your light up higher, darn you; it's black as pitch down here. Harm? Naw, there's been no harm done, so far as I know; but we can't be none too careful."

He pushed the door tightly shut, his voice not ceasing its growl even as the spring-lock clicked. Wayne, peering cautiously around the protecting stairway, was able to perceive dimly the dark shadow of his huge figure, bending above the floor of the hall.

"You vant a match?" questioned the Mexican anxiously.

"No; there's nothin' here; you must have dropped the gun outside somewhere—likely when you stooped to pick up that bird—an' there's no use our tryin' to hunt it to-night. Darn it, man, hold your light higher up, so I can see to climb these dinky steps."

The stairs creaked to the strain of his weight; then the sound ceased, and the door above closed, leaving the basement once more in silence and darkness. Wayne straightened up and ventured to feel his way again to the foot of the steps, listening for any noise.

His ears could not detect even the retreating footsteps of the two men, but somewhere in the distance the stray rat resumed its gnawing. He turned, and tried the door; it had been securely locked by a key in addition to the spring catch, and the key removed.

He was a prisoner; his way of escape entirely cut off.

The full realization of his position did not occur to him at once; not, indeed, until he had thoroughly explored in the darkness those two front-basement rooms, only to discover their windows so strongly boarded up as to prevent any attempt at opening them.

Convinced of this fact, he groped his slow way back into the hall, baffled and desperate. He must find some

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way out, or else be discovered there in the morning and fall helplessly into the hands of these men. What their mercy would be might easily be imagined.

The true seriousness of his position was now apparent to him, and he realized how foolish had been his entering the house at all. However, it was already too late for regret; nothing remained but an earnest effort to discover some means of escape.

The front of the house offered none, but possibly there might be revealed some weakness at the rear. He slowly felt his way along the side wall of the hall, unable to distinguish the slightest object, and fearful lest some accidental noise might betray his presence.

The young man felt assured that thus far he was alone in the basement, yet, if some incautious movement dislodged anything, or even if his foot came in contact with a creaking board, it might very easily create an alarm above. Those fellows, hiding and conscious of criminal designs, would be suspicious of every sound and quick to investigate its cause.

The hall extended straight back, and his hands feeling blindly through the darkness disclosed the presence of two more rooms, one on each side of the passage; but both doors were closed, and he made no effort to open them, convinced that if they possessed windows they would in all probability also be tightly secured.

A few feet beyond these he was surprised to encounter a second stairway, which he judged must lead directly upward to the kitchen. Back of these arose the solid basement wall, proving conclusively that he had reached the end of his resources in that direction.

Nothing remained for him but a venture to the second floor. Wayne came back to the foot of the steps, un-

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certain as to his next move, but endeavoring to bolster up his courage to the ascent.

It was no pleasant prospect, yet apparently no other choice remained. He must either stay where he was and await an inevitable discovery, or else risk the unknown danger above. Of the two, action of any kind was preferable, and this rear stairway surely offered a better chance than the one at the front.

If the two men still remained awake it was scarcely probable they would be found in the kitchen. At least it would be safe enough for him to creep up as far as the top of the stairs and listen.

He did this, finding his progress finally barred by a closed door of ordinary flimsy construction and apparently secured only by a latch. No glimmer of light appeared through the cracks, nor did any sound of occupancy emanate from the other side, as he listened intently with ear at the panel. Silently he lifted the iron latch and pressed the door partially open.

It operated noiselessly, and the darkness beyond was as profound as that in which he crouched. Whatever the room might be it was evidently unoccupied, and Wayne, his courage reviving, glided through the narrow opening, and closed the door behind him.

A moment's investigation revealed the fact that he had emerged into a large pantry, shelves lining the walls, with a sliding door opening into a commodious kitchen beyond. The shelves were mostly bare, with only a few odds and ends, largely in paper-bags stowed along one side.

The nature of the contents of these bags he could not clearly determine, although there was flour and sugar, in addition to a loaf of bread and part of a

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ham—the few necessities, no doubt, the present occupants of the house had stowed away. The unlighted kitchen beyond seemed fairly well furnished, for his cautious groping through its shadows revealed both a cook-stove and a gas-range, the former still retaining heat, and exhibiting a faint glimmer of fire in its grate.

The outer door was locked and he could find no key, while the windows were so secured that they could be opened only by force. He made an effort to release their fastenings, but the necessary noise caused him to desist, and turn his attention elsewhere. He searched for a hatchet, but the only thing approaching a weapon to be found was a small iron poker, useless for the purpose.

The condition of both pantry and kitchen seemed to indicate that those occupying the premises had no intention of making a prolonged stay. The supply of food was sufficient only for a day or two, and the contents of the wood-box bore evidence that the cooking was done largely by the use of broken fence pickets, or other odds and ends gathered about the place.

The rooms had a neglected, unswept feeling, the grime of dirt everywhere, as though no effort was being made to keep them clean. There were no curtains at the windows, and a clock on a shelf had run down.

Wayne sought for a knife, feeling about in the dark, and even exploring a drawer in a table he encountered, but found none of any value for his purpose, merely disclosing a cheap form of table cutlery.

His search, however, revealed two passages leading toward the front of the house, a closed door, probably opening into the upper hall, and a swinging door, which would naturally be the entrance to the dining-room.

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This latter he pushed back just far enough to obtain a view within.

Directly opposite, revealed through hanging curtains a lamp was burning, the light sufficient to make dimly visible the interior between. A table, uncovered, had been pushed back against the wall, but, with the exception of two chairs, there was no other furniture in the room.

A faded, rather disreputable-looking carpet covered the floor—all alike evidently relics of former occupancy. Wayne had no more than time to grasp these features when some one spoke gruffly in the room beyond.

"What's that? Nothin' more in the bottle? She's empty; that's a fact. Well, I can't play poker without a drink. Where's Nell?"

"Gone up to bed, I suppose, an hour ago," replied another gruffly. "Anyhow, I ain't seen her since afore you fellers come in."

"Then it's sure up to you, Steve, to hunt up the liquid refreshments." The speaker was Cowan, plainly enough, and already half drunk. "There's another bottle or two hid away somewhere. Take that other lamp and hunt 'em in the kitchen. Go on now, er I'll boot yer."

There was the scraping of a chair pushed back, and the figure of a man passed the narrow slit of light. Wayne permitted the swinging door to close, conscious only that he must find a hiding-place before the fellow, bearing the light along with him, could reach the kitchen.

Not knowing where the liquor might be stored, there was no safety anywhere in those rooms, and his thought instantly turned toward the other door. It opened

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silently, and he emerged, not a moment too soon, into the desolation of the front hallway.

The door leading into the parlor stood ajar, giving vent to a stream of light sufficient to reveal the principal features. The hall was broad, but had a bare, deserted appearance, being entirely devoid of furnishings. There were no pictures on the wall, which was badly discolored, but a narrow strip of straw-matting extended the full length.

A wide stairway, ornamented by a carved rail, ran to the story above; while beneath this was a closet, the opened door revealing a few garments hanging within. Wayne slipped into its shadows and stood motionless, unable to decide on his next move, and listening intently to the advance of Steve.

The latter made no attempt to hide his movements, his footsteps echoing noisily through the deserted rooms. Apparently he knew exactly where to go on his errand, as he returned almost immediately, the volume of light in the front room considerably increased as he entered with the second lamp.

"That the last o' the stuff, Dave," he announced gloomily, placing a bottle heavily on the table. "I sure thought there was two, but there ain't."

"Then Nell must have taken one."

"Likely 'nough; she ain't none too particular, but if she has, it's up in her room, an' I don't go pokin' 'round after it—not me. Enyhow, I reckon this will keep us goin' fer a while. Come on, Almerido, it's your deal again; an' now, fer Mike's sake, give me some decent cards."

The pasteboards slapped noisily on the table, and there was a gruff exchange of remarks relative to the game

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as the fellows resumed play, but the voices were so lowered that Wayne was able to distinguish only an occasional word. Unable to resist the temptation, and hoping to overhear some message of guidance, he slipped silently along the wall to where he could gain view through the partially open door.

The three men were seated at a round table, Cowan facing the entrance, but so intent on the fortunes of the game as to never lift his eyes. Judging from the scowl on his face he was in unusually bad humor, while an occasional muttered oath indicated that the cards were not running to his liking.

Almerido sat opposite, leaning well back in his chair, with Steve at the right. The latter was a young fellow, with red face and a shock of straw-colored hair, apparently well under the influence of drink, and in his shirt-sleeves. He looked like an ordinary gangster, quite capable of any dirty job, but not overly blessed with brains.

The bottle occupied the center of the table, with two glasses beside it, the Mexican to all appearances not indulging, although vigorously smoking a cigarette. The room itself bore the same evidences of age and neglect so apparent elsewhere in the house, yet was crowded with furniture, old-fashioned and expensive, and the floor was rather gayly carpeted.

A single glance had given Wayne these details, but the risk of being seen made him draw back, content to listen. The delay was not a long one, for Cowan flung down his remaining cards with a roar of anger.

"Darn such a hand!" he growled savagely. "I never played in worse luck. Push me that glass, Groggin."

The young fellow laughed as he did so—a half-tipsy laugh.

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"First time to-night I drew anything," he declared. "And you took the last two pots—so there's no kick comin'. What yer goin' ter do with thet guy, Dave?" he questioned, as an after-thought. "I'd croak him if it wus me."

"And likely get stretched for it," returned Cowan disgustedly. "I don't know which of you two duffers is the biggest fool. The Don here hed thet same notion."

"Vel," broke in the Mexican, "zen he no talk, an' who ever find heem here—hey? 'Tis my vay to make zem no talk."

"Yes, I guess it is; but this ain't Mexico, *señor*. Croakin' a guy up here is apt to turn out a rotten, bad job. Besides, why should we croak him?

"Does anybody know he was after us? Maybe you do, but I don't; an' what's more, there ain't goin' ter be any killin' in this game, unless it's necessary."

"Then what yer goin' ter do with him?" insisted Groggin. "I reckon we got a right ter know that."

"S'posin' you have, and if I tell you, will you feel any better about it? All right, then, listen: I guess Almerido here is the brains of this outfit; anyhow, he's a pretty foxy guy, and has sure put us in the way of a bit of easy money.

"I'm not kickin' 'bout that, and the only reason I'm in on the game is because I know Chicago. Well, this is Chi, ain't it? And while we're here I'm goin' to have my say.

"I know this town, and how to work it, and neither one of you stiffs are goin' to tell me where to get off, or queer the job by croakin' anybody. We've got to do some of that stuff in a way, but it 'll be quiet, and ac-

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