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THE TRAGEDY AT THE BEACH CLUB

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By William Johnston

THE MYSTERY IN THE RITSMORE

THE APARTMENT NEXT DOOR

THE HOUSE OF WHISPERS

LIMPY

THE BOY WHO FELT NEGLECTED

THE YELLOW LETTER

THE TRAGEDY AT THE BEACH CLUB

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HE FOUND HIMSELF GAZING INTO THE BLACK, LIMPID, FRIGHTENED EYES OF A PRETTY ITALIAN GIRL.

FRONTISPIECE. *See page* 142.

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THE TRAGEDY AT THE BEACH CLUB

By
WILLIAM JOHNSTON

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY
MARSHALL FRANTZ

BOSTON
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY
1922

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THE TRAGEDY AT THE BEACH CLUB

CHAPTER I

WATCHING EYES

On, on, through the night, there sped relentlessly a little roadster, its solitary occupant dust-begrimed and bearing marks of weariness as if from a long journey, yet apparently grimly determined to reach some fixed goal within a given time.

On several occasions as the car stopped while its occupant inquired the way, invariably the person addressed turned to stare wonderingly after the departing traveler. In the motorist's face was a strange, inscrutable expression, a look indicative of some fixed, definite purpose, almost a maniacal glare that seemed to portray an intense purpose to carry out some great resolve, cost what it might.

Presently the car, after its occupant had once more inquired the directions, turned off the main

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thoroughfare and began proceeding more slowly, as if there were need for caution over a less-traveled road.

At the same hour, hardly half a mile distant, there crept through a narrow strip of woods that lined the Sound a sinister figure, intent on avoiding observation, a figure whose eyes were blazing with resentment, hate, despair, a figure moving swiftly yet silently, slipping noiselessly from cover behind one tree to another, but all the while persistently advancing toward a goal on the shore that was marked by a blaze of lights and the sound of merry voices.

In the same locality, too, had one an all-seeing vision that could read the innermost hearts of men, there would have been noted two men, ostensibly friends, mingling in a reveling throng, their thoughts masked behind smiling faces; two men, — one possessed by a great fear, and the other by consuming wrath.

Yet surely no one, however prophetic his vision or however psychic his gifts, looking, on that peaceful June night, at the pretty scene in our little club — the Beach Club, we call it — could possibly have

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suspected the presence there of the grisly shadow of Tragedy as, entirely unobserved, it crept closer — and closer — and closer.

The pleasant picture the clubhouse presented might have been duplicated at any one of the hundred summer colonies about New York, — a cluster of matrons, cool in sport clothes, ranged along the wall of the ballroom floor, placidly chatting of new crochet stitches, servants' wages, recent plays, engaged couples, thoroughly enjoying in their own mature fashion the tittle-tattle of a friendly community, as they occasionally turned observant maternal glances to the dancing floor to see how their daughters were behaving and which of the men they were getting as dancing partners. In the card room adjoining, the club's four inveterates, Pressly Hart, Doctor Rhodes, John Dixon and Ed Manners, as usual, were wrangling over half-cent auction, their rank swelled on this, the weekly dance night, by a sufficient number of husbands and fathers to make three other tables. A few more of the older men sat placidly smoking in the piazza rockers.

And elsewhere — everywhere — was Youth —

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youth in couples, with some few of the newly married folk, foxtrotting jerkily to "Vamp a Little Lady," gliding gracefully, even if perspiringly, to the subtler strains of "The Blue Danube," and between dances cooling off in merry groups on the wide piazzas where they could watch the moonbeams cut sparkling capers on the wide waters of the Sound.

Of all places in the world assuredly this little friendly, happy club at Rockmont seemed the most unlikely setting for a great tragedy. The families represented — there were hardly fifty of them — had been coming to the place, all of them, for years. They were, without exception, of the more prosperous, untemperamental, wholesome middle class, most of them owning their own cottages and all of them their own cars. Their boys and girls had grown up together. Every one in the place knew everything there was to know about everybody else, or — until this night of tragedy — had thought they did.

An air of good fellowship, of neighborly feeling, seemed to pervade the whole club, and among the dancers as they chatted there was that frank

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camaraderie and pleasant chaffing only possible among tried acquaintances.

"Poor old Bill," a laughing girl taunted her partner — he was under thirty — "you men, as you get old, get dreadfully soft."

"This to me," he retorted, "when I've already danced three times with you this sweltering night."

"I didn't mean that. That's harder on me than on you, for you never will learn to dance, but ——"

"But what?"

She hesitated a trifle before answering.

"None of you men seem to have any pep these days."

"Meaning which?"

"I can't find a single man to get up at six tomorrow to play tennis with me."

"Try a married one. They're easier."

"Don't get fresh, Bill Tilt. You're not half as game as you used to be when we were kids together."

"I'm a business man now. I haven't time for childish follies."

"To-morrow's Saturday," she challenged him. "You don't go to business Saturdays."

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"Think how hard I work the other five days while you girls out here do nothing but play around all day and have a good time."

"A good time," she echoed scornfully. "I wish you had a week of it — nothing to do all day long and not a man to talk to until the six-eighteen gets in. Please, Bill, won't you?"

"Why pick on me?" he replied almost peevishly. "Rout Carew out to play with you."

"Paul Carew's an engaged man," she replied, coloring prettily at this mention of her fiancé's name. "He has to work Saturdays. It becomes him to take life seriously, when he'll soon have a wife to support."

Mollie Manners' engagement to Carew, announced three weeks before, had been the summer's sensation in the colony. Carew was a comparative stranger. At the close of the war he had been brought to Rockmont as a guest by a fellow officer who had known him in France. Each summer since he had returned, living at the Inn in the village, enthusiastically joining in the sports, mingling freely with all the young people, in the course of the season being entertained at least once for dinner in

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most of the houses, meanwhile carrying on his courtship of Mollie with such craft that no one had suspected his intention until the announcement of their betrothal.

To most of them it had come as a complete surprise, and to Bill Tilt as a shock. He felt that he had been or was about to be deprived of a good playmate. Sometimes, when he was alone and began to think about it, he wished he had proposed to Mollie himself. Life without her, he felt, would be strangely lonesome, almost unbearable.

"If I were engaged to you," he snapped, "even if I did have to go to business, I'd get up at six for you."

"Paul wanted to," she answered proudly, "but I wouldn't let him."

"What's the big idea, anyhow?" growled Tilt. "Why this early stuff?"

"It's the tournament. I'm just crazy to get in a lot of practise and surprise everybody. I'm out for the cup in the ladies' singles. Besides, it's lovely and cool early in the morning, and we'll have the courts all to ourselves. Please, Bill, won't you — pretty please?"

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Into her great dark eyes came a pleading look, a soft, alluring look that Tilt had never been able to withstand, and her concluding phrase, the "pretty please" brought back to his mind with a rush vividly pleasant memories of their merry times together — long before Carew had come — when they were just boy and girl together.

"All right, all right!" he cried, as the music stopped, holding up his hands in mock token of surrender, as the couples about them applauded vigorously for an encore.

"Remember, six sharp," she warned him, as they stood waiting a moment.

The music started up again. Tilt, lowering his hands, was about to encircle her waist again, when Carew cut in and swept her away.

"I'll be waiting on the courts for you," she called back smilingly over her shoulder, as Tilt, resentful and disgruntled, abandoned the dancing and sought solace in a cigarette in solitude on the verandah.

On went the dancing, the gossip, the bridge, and closer and yet closer crept the sinister shadow of tragedy, still with no warning of its coming unless

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some one might have observed, peering furtively in from a back window — a window that looked out on a sort of court where the cars were parked — two frightened eyes that roved the ballroom as if in search of something or some one. Presently, if any one had been watching closely, they might have seen the eyes stop and tighten and have noticed creeping into them a strange set expression of — what was it — hate or hopelessness. But only for a fleeting instant were the watching eyes visible. As quickly as they had appeared, they vanished again, the outer darkness swallowing up their owner before any one of the dancers had noticed the occurrence.

Otherwise there was no hint of the unusual, no foreshadowing of the terrible, no warning of the dreadful, mysterious tragedy that before the morning would cast its gloom on all the merry dancers, would wreck the happiness of some, would shatter lifelong friendships and would spread its poison through the whole community.

Unconscious of the sword above their heads, the merry assemblage danced on. Peace, contentment and the joy of living was theirs. Even from the

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faces of the men at the card tables the evening's pastime seemed to have wiped away the worry lines of business cares. So far as any one could see, it was a perfect picture of a happy, carefree community.

All too soon came twelve o'clock and the good-night dance. The matrons, for the most part trustfully leaving their daughters to be escorted home by boy friends, gathering up their wraps, invaded the card room in a body to stand firmly united against husbandly please for "just one more rubber." In a very few minutes the club entrance was thronged with the departing and noisy with merry "good nights."

Paul Carew, as usual, was waiting for Mollie as she emerged from the cloakroom, and many a glance was bestowed on them as they stood there together. Physically they seemed an ideal couple for mating. Dark-eyed, slender, her masses of auburn hair always were kept trim and shining. Slim-ankled and dainty, her bared arms, softly rounded though they were, had the brown of the athlete, and her pretty face glowed with health and good nature, though her square chin indicated that on occasion she could

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display a mind and will of her own. Generally she gave the impression of being a tall girl, but the man beside her towered a good six inches above her. If ever there had been a tendency on his part to slouch over, it had been remedied by his army service. He stood there straight and erect, blond as she was dark. His well-fitting dinner coat gave to his shoulders perhaps undeserved breadth, and a captious critic might have considered his lips a trifle loose, without being able to dispute the fact that he was a handsome man. Though he was undoubtedly American-born, there was something about his face — perhaps his rather large, aquiline nose, perhaps the expression of his gray-green eyes — that gave most persons on first meeting him a feeling that somewhere in his pedigree was a considerable strain of alien blood. At any rate he appeared well-bred and cultured, and it was generally understood in the colony that he was an electrical engineer, who after Amherst had taken a course at Cornell which he had completed just before entering the army. Apparently, too, he had some means besides his profession, for he lived comfortably and kept a car. Mollie Manners, too, the colony knew, had a

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small income of her own, so altogether the match was considered a suitable one.

"Mollie, dear," Carew whispered, drawing her a little apart from the others, "would you mind it very much if I didn't go home with you to-night — if you went on with the family?"

"What is it?" she cried, scanning his face solicitously. "Are you ill?"

"Not at all," he laughed reassuringly.

"You're sure?"

"Quite. It's just some business."

"Business at this hour of the night!" her eyes sought the clock. "It's long after twelve."

"It's some papers," he explained nervously, "something I have to get fixed up before morning. Something ——" he hesitated for just a second, "something I promised to attend to."

"Oh," she said, "of course that is different. I don't mind in the least. Only, Paul dear, don't stay up too late."

"Don't worry," he replied, "I shan't."

Perplexedly her eyes sought his. Despite his reassuring words, there was something in his manner, a nervousness, something — she could hardly

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describe it — that seemed strange and different about him. She feared that he might be feeling ill and was keeping it from her. Or perhaps it was some business worry? What could it be? It was unlike him to be upset about business, yet she noticed that his hand as he clasped her was trembling and clammy. Once again she raised her eyes questioningly to his.

Unmindful of the crowd about them, with an accepted lover's daring, he bent and kissed her lightly on the lips, then springing lightly into his car, dashed away in the direction of the Inn, both he and Mollie utterly unconscious that the eyes of at least three persons who had witnessed their parting kiss, two of them in the clubhouse, and a third person hidden in the black shadows outside, had sent after Carew, departing, frowning, unfriendly, bitter glances.

And closer, and still closer, crept Tragedy.

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CHAPTER II

MORNING'S REVELATIONS

ALL too early for Tilt came Saturday morning. Returning from the club dance shortly after midnight, he had retired immediately, but not to sleep. The thought that he must be up again by six was far from being a soporific, and besides all through the hours he had been haunted and harassed by visions of Mollie. There kept recurring to his mind, distastefully and annoyingly, the picture she had made in their last dance together, a picture rudely shattered by the masterful, proprietary way in which Paul Carew had swept her away from him.

"Damn Carew," he muttered to himself, "I wish he never had turned up here."

Hitherto Tilt, with no thought of matrimony, with no conscious feeling of love toward his old playmate, had been content to drift along in the pleasant sunshine of her companionship. Now, as the prospect loomed closer and closer of her becoming another man's wife, he realized, with poign-

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ant regret, that he loved Mollie Manners, that he always had loved her.

He was in a savage mood as he left his home and hurried along the beach toward the courts, swinging his racquet viciously at the nodding daisies along his path. Yet it was hard to be ill-tempered on such a morning as this with the prospects of having two hours alone with Mollie. As the cool sea air, with its pleasant, elusive tang, struck his face and filled his lungs, his mood quickly softened.

Mollie was right, he decided. It was wonderful in the early morning. The sun, coming up behind Little Island, was cutting a golden path across the Sound's incoming tide. The sea birds, busy with breakfast, were fluttering about everywhere, a horde of hungry gulls, like scout planes, watching each wave crest for floating dainties, croaking their dissatisfaction as they sailed along, while in the shallows of the cove the silent cranes hopped about with grotesque dignity, seeking unwary fish. From the leafy shelters of the woods near by came the raucous notes of the crows, the trill of robins and the mischievous cries of catbirds.

Tilt was hardly five minutes in reaching the

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courts, and as he arrived he looked about with a feeling of triumph. Early as it was, apparently he had been the first to arrive. He hurried on a little farther to a place commanding a view of Lloyd's Point, confidently expecting to see Mollie racing toward him, but she was nowhere in sight. For a moment he felt puzzled. It was not at all like her to be late. Some girls he knew would have considered it a great joke to date a man for six o'clock and then keep him waiting for half an hour, but Mollie was not that sort. Brought up among boys, it was her custom always to be prompt in keeping engagements.

It occurred to him then that she might already have arrived and be in the clubhouse getting her racquet or putting on her tennis shoes. Sometimes in the years gone by, when they used to have these early engagements more frequently, he recalled that she had been in the habit of stopping at the caretaker's cottage for the key and opening up the clubhouse. Probably that was where she was now.

As he turned back and approached the building, he saw what he had not noticed before, — that the door was standing ajar. His conclusions thus veri-

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fied, he started for the steps, his lips shaping themselves into a cheery call to announce his arrival, but he stopped short in his tracks.

From somewhere — it seemed to him from within the clubhouse — there came a shrill, unforgettable, prolonged scream, like the cry of some person or animal in mortal agony, a terrifying, unearthly sound, such as it seemed hardly possible for any human being to make.

What was it? What did it mean? What could have happened?

Bewildered by the amazing scream, he stopped for a second and stood there listening, half expecting to hear the cry repeated. Strangely enough, at first no thought of Mollie came into his head. The cry he had heard had not sounded in the least like her voice, and at any rate he knew that she was not the sort of girl given to shrieking or screaming. He was not even sure that the sound had come from the clubhouse. There was a muffled quality about it as if it might have come from some distance away, perhaps from one of the yachts at anchor a quarter of a mile away.

But Mollie — where was she?

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She must be somewhere about, probably in the clubhouse. He must find her at once. If she had heard that scream, it undoubtedly would have alarmed her. Suppose something had happened to her, something dreadful? With his heart in his throat, he took the steps two at a time and made for the open door, all sorts of wild imaginings filling his brain.

If Mollie were in there, who could be with her? He knew the building now was untenanted at night. Two weeks ago the steward had been discharged for stealing, and his place had not yet been filled. Old Hodder, who looked after the boats, kept the key at his shack down on the beach. The last to leave at night snapped the spring lock on the door, and the first to arrive stopped at old Hodder's and got the key. Striving vainly to conjecture what might have happened, with his alarm for Mollie's safety increasing, he made for the door, but before he reached it he heard steps — some one coming toward him — some one running — running fast. Instinctively his muscles stiffened, and his fists clinched. If any one was in there, if any one had harmed or had frightened Mollie ——

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It was Mollie herself.

She dashed out of the place as if all the devils in hell were after her. She was neither shrieking nor crying, but her breath was coming in short, quick gasps that seemed almost to choke her, and in her eyes was the most fear stricken look that Tilt had ever seen.

"Mollie," he cried, putting out his arms, "what's happened? What's the matter?"

She seemed not even to have seen him. With her eyes staring, with that look of dreadful horror still in them, she ran right on, straight past him as he attempted to seize her.

"Mollie!" he cried again, but she paid no attention and kept on running, running as fast as she could in the direction of her own home.

Puzzled beyond measure, utterly at a loss to understand what could have terrified her so, Tilt dashed after her. Although in his college days he had been on the track team and even now prided himself on his speed, run as fast as he could he was unable to catch up with her. She ran madly on and on, making no sound except that queer, choking gasp. He was just behind her as she reached home

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and dashed up the front steps and through the door into the living room. Seeming even in her hysteria to realize that she was at home and safe, she gave a little cry — something that sounded to Tilt like "Mother"— and fell in a senseless heap to the floor.

It had not seemed to Tilt that they had made much noise as they entered the house, but there must have been more than he imagined for as he bent over Mollie, Kit — the Terrible Kit — Mollie's younger sister, came flying down the stairs in her pyjamas, her bobbed black hair all tousled from the pillow. She stopped short on the landing as she saw Tilt and her sister lying on the floor, let out a shriek and dashed back upstairs. In half a second the whole house was in commotion. Mrs. Manners and Mollie's brother Ed and the servants, in various stages of deshabille, ran into the living room. Mrs. Manners was the only one who seemed to have kept her head. Without saying a word, she got a pillow under her daughter and began trying with brandy and smelling salts to revive her. The others, crowding around the bewildered Tilt, all began asking at once what had happened.

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The Terrible Kit, reappearing in a kimono, pushed past the others and shaking her fist in Tilt's face, tragically screamed out:

"What have you done to my sister?"

Tilt, as soon as he could get them somewhat calmed down, told them all he knew about it, which of course was practically nothing.

"Mollie has been badly frightened," said Mrs. Manners, looking up from her task. "She must have seen somebody or something in the clubhouse. Bill, why don't you and Ed go down there and investigate? Some tramps may have got into the clubhouse. But, Ed, before you go, I wish you'd telephone Doctor Rhodes to come over."

Ed, still in his bathrobe, went at once to the 'phone, which was in an alcove just off the living room, where every one could hear what he said. He had some trouble in getting the number, as invariably is the case when you try to get a surburban number in the early morning, and when he did, they gathered from what he was saying that Doctor Rhodes was not at home. At that both Mrs. Manners and Tilt exchanged surprised glances, for Rhodes had been at the club the night before.

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