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Knibloe Bouton Cary

His Book

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THE MYSTERY OF THE HIDDEN ROOM

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THE MYSTERY OF THE HIDDEN ROOM

BY

MARION HARVEY

NEW YORK
EDWARD J. CLODE

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THE MYSTERY OF THE HIDDEN ROOM

CHAPTER I

THE NOTE

I HAD intended spending the evening at the Club; but after my solitary meal, I found that I was too tired to care to leave my own inviting fireside. Drawing up a chair before the open grate in my library, for the October night was chill and the landlord had not sufficiently relented to order the steam-heat, I settled myself comfortably with my book and pipe. The story I had chosen was a murder mystery, extremely clever and well-written, and so engrossed did I become that I was entirely oblivious to the passage of time.

The entrance of my man, Jenkins, brought me back to my surroundings with a start to find that the clock on the mantel was chiming eleven. A little impatient at the interruption for I had not concluded the story, I grew sarcastic.

"What is it, Jenkins? Have you come to remind me that it is long past my bed-time?" I inquired.

Jenkins' face grew longer if such a thing were possible in a countenance already attenuated by nature into the semblance of perpetual gloom, and shook his head with a grieved air as though he considered my remark an aspersion upon his knowledge of his duties as a valet.

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"A man who claims to be Mrs. Darwin's chauffeur, sir," he replied in a tone that indicated that he at least would not be responsible for the veracity of the statement, "has just brought this note. He says that he will await the answer below in his machine, sir."

He extended an unaddressed white envelope with a funereal air. The note was from Ruth. The message was brief and to the point.

"Will you return at once with my chauffeur? I need you."

"My hat and coat, Jenkins," I cried, flinging aside my jacket. "You need not wait up for me. I have my key," I added.

I could have descended the stairs a half dozen times before the elevator finally arrived, or so it seemed to my impatience. The moment we reached the lobby I was out of the elevator and down the steps into the waiting motor before the boy had recovered his wits sufficiently to follow me to the door.

The chauffeur evidently had his instructions, for I was hardly within before the machine was speeding toward the Drive. My bachelor apartments were situated on 72nd Street, just off the Park, and I knew we could not cover the distance to the Darwin home on the outskirts of Riverside Drive in less than twenty minutes, even at the rate at which we were traveling.

I had stuffed Ruth's note into my pocket as I left. Mechanically I drew it forth and tore it to shreds, flinging the scraps from the window. Letters are commonplace things.

What had possessed Ruth to commit herself to writing after the compact we had made to have no further communication with each other! It was she who had

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suggested that we become as strangers, and I could only read in this sudden appeal and the haste with which I was being whirled toward her some dread calamity. Nor was my anxiety lessened by the fact that I was hopelessly in love with her. Yes, hopelessly, I speak advisedly, because she was another man's wife, and while that man lived she would be true to him although he deserved it less than anyone I knew.

To think that a few short months ago Ruth and I had been engaged! If I had had my way we should have been married at once without any fuss, and so should have avoided the trouble that befell us, but Ruth wanted a trousseau and a big wedding, so like many a better man before me I humored her to the extent of promising to wait another month.

Did I say a month? Six have passed and I am waiting yet, while Ruth has had her wish, for her wedding was a sort of nine days' wonder, Philip Darwin having long been voted by his feminine friends as "the type of man who never marries, my dear."

In letting my bitterness run away with my discretion, I have begun my story at the wrong end, giving a false impression of the facts of the case, for I never once dreamed of blaming or censuring Ruth for the misery that her decision cost me.

Two weeks before the date set for my wedding, Ruth came to me with tears in her eyes, and laying the ring I had given her upon the table begged me if I loved her never to see her again. I was decidedly taken aback, but I retained sufficient presence of mind to laugh at her and to request her not to be absurd. She was not to be diverted, however, nor would she say

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anything beyond a reiteration of the fact that if I loved her I would be willing to obey her without questioning her motives.

All of which was folly to my way of thinking, and being very much in love, I refused to be disposed of in any such high-handed fashion, particularly as I felt that as her affianced husband I was entitled to some say in the proceedings. Never in the course of my life before had I been called upon to plead so skillfully, and plead I did; for it was more than my life I was fighting for, it was our love, our happiness, our future home. Gradually I wore down her defenses and finally she sobbed out the whole pitiful story.

Her brother, her adored and darling Dick, whom she had mothered almost from the time that he was born, had fallen of late under the influence of Philip Darwin, director of the bank of which her father was president and Dick assistant cashier. Handsome, spoiled, the boy had been flattered by the attentions of the older man, who explained his interest on the ground that Dick reminded him strongly of what he had been ten years before. Under his tutelage, then, the boy early became a devotee of the twin gods of gambling and of drink.

Two nights before in a questionable gambling den to which Philip Darwin had taken him, Dick, his temper inflamed by the strong liquor he had been drinking, quarreled with his neighbor, accusing him of trying to cheat. The fellow, a big, powerful chap, made for Dick, who pulled out a pistol which Darwin had given him, and fired. His opponent went down like a log, and as the man fell, Darwin extinguished the light. In the confusion that ensued the older man got the boy

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away to his home, where Dick gathered some things together and with the connivance of his father left for the West.

Of course the affair came out in the papers, I recalled it as Ruth spoke, and the police were on the hunt for the unknown assailant of the dead man. Fortunately for Dick, both he and Darwin attended these places in disguise and a trip West for the scion of a wealthy family was no unusual event, hence his absence from social circles was easily accounted for, and Ruth and her father were merely waiting for the furore to abate before sending for the boy, when Darwin exploded a bomb in their midst.

He had always admired Ruth, he had always wanted to make her his wife. She had spurned his love and he had accepted defeat stoically. But now things were different. Her brother was wanted by the police for murder. The police, to be sure, didn't know it was her brother that they wanted but he, Philip Darwin, was quite willing to supply them with the information unless Ruth agreed to become his bride.

"What was there for me to do, Carlton, but to acquiesce?" she had ended with a sob. "Philip Darwin is an implacable man. And even if Dick eluded the police, think of the disgrace for Daddy and for me. It's terrible enough that he should have killed a man, but that he should become a hunted thing, my little brother—! No, no! I'd rather sacrifice my love than have that happen!"

I remained silent, for I could think of no argument that would suffice to meet the situation, and taking my apparent immobility for acceptance, she continued: "It's a big sacrifice, dear, I know, but you will bear it

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bravely for my sake, because—because there is more in life than love alone and it's the honor of my name that is at stake."

In the face of her sublime unselfishness I felt that I could do no less than prove myself as noble as she deemed me. I agreed, therefore, to give her up and when she said we had better not meet again I consented dumbly, comprehending the wisdom of her decision even while my heart rebelled against its enforcement.

When she had gone my resentment flared full and strong, but curiously enough not against the one who had been the chief cause of the ruin of my happiness. I felt only pity, a profound and sincere pity, for the misguided boy who had committed the crime. My anger blazed toward that man who by his foolish adoration of his only son had spoiled and indulged the boy to his own undoing. What right had any man to bring up a son in that fashion? How dared his father let him loose upon the world without teaching him the first principles of self-restraint?

It was not Dick but Mr. Trenton who was to blame for the boy's act. Almost from the moment that he could make his wants known the boy had been given to understand that what he wanted was his for the asking. Everyone in the home had to give way before him. He was never crossed and never denied. Small wonder that when he grew to manhood he should expect the world to give as much and more than his father had done, that when he ran across temptation he had no moral strength to resist, and that he became an easy prey to a man of Philip Darwin's type.

Here my thoughts veered abruptly to the man who would soon become Ruth's husband and for a moment

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I saw red. Ruth, pure, sweet Ruth, married to that vile wretch! I could not endure it.

I had actually grasped my hat and was on the point of hastening to her home to plead with her not to sacrifice herself in so dreadful a manner, even if she never married me, when I paused, for the horrible alternative flashed across my mind. With a groan I returned to my library where the remainder of the night I wrestled with what to me seemed the only solution to the problem, the instant and speedy death of Philip Darwin.

By morning I was saner. There was not much use in jumping out of the frying-pan into the fire, and besides what did I know of Philip Darwin beyond the fact that he had been the one to lead Dick astray? For ought I knew to the contrary he might make Ruth a very good and devoted husband. There were hundreds of cases on record where a man had been reformed and steadied by marriage.

Though all this philosophizing by no means alleviated the pain in my heart, still it helped to allay the fever in my tortured brain, and from that time on I resolutely put Ruth from my mind and plunged into my work in an effort to forget.

Forget! How much had I forgotten in the six months that had passed? Not one single detail had escaped my memory and it all came back with tenfold force for having been thrust out of sight so long. With a groan I buried my head in my hands.

How long I remained thus oblivious to time and space I do not know. The chauffeur's voice brought me back to a realization that we had arrived at our destination. I alighted and as he backed the car down the drive I paused a moment before ascending the

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steps to try to distinguish something of this home whose mistress Ruth had become.

It was very dark, a dull, cloudy night, and all I beheld was a great black bulk looming before me like some Plutonian monster, harbinger of evil, and the soughing of the wind in the branches of the nearby trees gave me such a feeling of superstitious dread that I raced up the steps and rang the bell as though in fear of my life.

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CHAPTER II

THE SHOT

THE door was opened for me by Ruth herself, who drew me within, and locked it behind me. Then with a finger on her lip, she led the way in silence to the drawing-room, seeming to breathe only when the door of that room was closed against further intrusion.

"What is it, Ruth?" I asked, more and more alarmed by all this secrecy coming on top of my own foolish fears.

Instead of answering she drew me down beside her on the divan and touched with her fingers my graying temples.

"Did I do that to you, Carlton?" she murmured, brokenly. "Oh, my dear, I wonder you had the courage to forgive me!"

"Ruth!" I cried sharply and at the misery in my voice she slipped to her knees and buried her face in her arms.

"Forgive me," she sobbed. "I should not have let myself go, but sometimes I feel I must go mad, alone night after night in this great silent house with only that horrible secretary of Phil's for company!"

"Hush," I returned, drawing her to me, but she pushed me from her and raised her head in a startled way.

"Listen!" she whispered, holding up her hand. "I thought I heard someone prowling around."

More to satisfy Ruth and ease her fears, for I had

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heard no sound, I went to the door and flung it open. But the dimly lighted hall was empty save for the wavering shadows that lost themselves in the gloom of the stairwell. The utter silence and loneliness of the great house gave me an eerie feeling, and I was glad to close the door and return to Ruth.

She had regained command of herself and was once more seated on the divan. As I approached she questioned me with her eyes. With a shake of the head and a reassuring smile, I resumed my place beside her.

"I thought I could stand it," she said, after what seemed an interminable interval, "but you don't know what I have had to put up with. No, Carlton, please!" for I had caught her to me in my desire to shield her from all harm.

"Forgive me," I returned humbly, rising and pacing the long room, "but I can't bear to hear you say such things when I love you so!"

"I know, Carlton. I won't grieve you that way again. It was for another reason that I asked you here."

She was so long, however, in telling me that reason that I had time to study her more closely, and my heart grew ever more bitter as I saw how thin she was and how the lines of suffering had gathered on her white brow and around her sweet, drooping mouth. Verily I cursed the day that Philip Darwin had crossed Ruth's path, and if he had entered the room at that moment I honestly believe I should have killed him.

She must have read my thought for she cried out sharply, "No, no, Carlton, not that!" and when I flushed she added more quietly, "Won't you come and sit beside me, please?"

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When I had complied with her request, she lowered her voice until it was the merest thread, at the same time looking around her as if she feared the presence of someone else in the room.

"You know I have a feeling that Mr. Orton, Phil's secretary, is always hanging around listening and spying upon me. Ugh, he makes me shiver with his prominent, nearsighted eyes, his eternal humility and mock grin. He reminds me of Uriah Heep in *David Copperfield*. I suppose I'm foolish, but I've been alone so much of late."

"But, Ruth, I thought your father lived here with you?"

"Yes, he did, but two weeks ago the doctor told him to take a vacation and he has been visiting friends out of town. I expect him home to-morrow or the next day at the latest. Then I shall be all right again."

She clasped her hands in her lap and strove to keep back the tears.

"Ruth, dear," I said, taking her little trembling hands in both my own, "why did you send for me? Surely there is something I can do!"

She smiled faintly as she gently withdrew her hands and reclasped them in her lap. "It was for your sake I sent for you," she said, simply.

"For my sake?" I asked puzzled.

"You'd think that I had caused you enough suffering without adding needlessly to your sorrow," she continued, as if to herself. "Oh, Carlton," turning suddenly toward me, "forgive me, but I did a very foolish thing last night. I was so lonely and dispirited and nervous with hearing Mr. Orton prowling around and seeing him appear suddenly from shadowy corners

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that I locked myself in my room and poured out my heart to you."

"Ruth, darling!" I murmured.

"It was foolish, Carlton, nay more, it was imprudent, and realizing this last fact I tore up the letter and threw it in my waste basket. I would have done better to have kept it, for to-night about ten-thirty, when I was on the point of retiring, Mr. Orton knocked on my door and said that Phil desired my presence in his study."

"You obeyed?"

"Yes," she answered wearily. "It is only one of the many indignities I have had to endure. So I followed him to the study and there on the table the first thing I laid my eyes on was my letter—all those scraps pasted together on a larger sheet. Think of it, Carlton!"

But I couldn't think. The petty sordidness of it was beyond me. I could only stare at her and speak a name below my breath. Orton was what I said.

"Yes, he had found the letter. He examines my waste basket every day it seems," she continued, bitterly, "in hopes of finding just what he did find this morning. An unfaithful husband is always sure to be suspicious of his wife, and her moral superiority is equally sure to gall him."

"I am not going to tell you what Phil said," she went on presently. "I couldn't, for most of it passed me by. But when he spoke of revenging himself upon you, of ruining you and breaking you, then I decided it was time to act. He told me he was going out, so I sent my maid with the note and instructions to my chauffeur. I had to warn you, to put you on your guard that you might be able to fight any rumors

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which he may spread. But, Carlton, please promise me that you will keep out of his way. Please, for my sake!"

She clung to me as I shook my head impatiently. "It would only make it harder for me, Carlton!" she pleaded.

"Never mind me, Ruth!" I said almost angrily. "Think of yourself for a few minutes. Why don't you get a divorce or at least a separation? You have more than enough grounds."

"No, no. He would take it out on Dick. Don't you see he has me in his power!"

It was useless to try to influence her, especially as I could well appreciate the justice of her remark. I slightly cursed Philip Darwin for a blackguard, and then turned the conversation into a side channel.

"Ruth, do you think you could get that letter for me?" I asked.

"Why, Carlton?"

"Because it is a powerful weapon to hold over you if he should ever decide to cast you aside." Seeing that this had no effect upon her, I added—would that I had cut my tongue out ere it had uttered those words! "because he can use it as a weapon against me."

Instantly she was on her feet. "He put it in the drawer of the table in his study. Stay here, dear, while I see if I can get it."

She opened the door of the drawing-room and crossed the hall to the study. The drawing-room occupied about one-third of the lower floor of the main wing and lay to the right of the entrance hall, while the study was its exact counterpart on the left, so that the door of the study was directly opposite the door

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of the drawing-room which was now open before me.

I saw Ruth try the door of the study and as it yielded to her hand she advanced timidly into the room, leaving the door barely ajar behind her. My view being thus effectually cut off I strained forward in an endeavor to catch the slightest sound, but was only rewarded by the most profound stillness, through which there presently echoed and re-echoed the voice of the old clock in the hall proclaiming the midnight hour. Then, as if that ancient time-piece had been the signal previously agreed upon, there rang through the house from the direction of the study the sharp report of a pistol, followed by silence, absolute, profound!

A moment I remained petrified, then with a bound I gained the study door, my one thought for Ruth. But on the threshold I stood rooted to the spot by the sight that met my eyes!

In the patch of light cast by a small lamp upon the study table, lying back in his chair with a sardonic grin on his face and an ever-widening stain upon his shirt front, was Philip Darwin, while beside him as if turned to stone, stood Ruth with a pistol in her hand!

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CHAPTER III

THE POLICE

"RUTH!"

My cry startled her. Dropping the pistol and flinging out her arms, she laughed hysterically and stumbled toward me. Something in my face, perhaps the horror I could not help revealing, arrested her before she reached me.

"Carlton! Surely you can't think I killed him!" she cried. "It—it would be too monstrous!" And with a fluttering sigh she sank in a heap on the floor.

Tenderly I gathered her limp form in my arms and was on the point of bearing her from the room when suddenly without any warning the study was flooded with light and Philip Darwin's secretary was standing obsequiously before me.

"Shall I telephone for a doctor, Mr. Davies? And for the police?" with a glance at his erstwhile master.

At mention of the police I frowned though I knew of course that their presence was inevitable. But there was no need to bring them buzzing about our ears any sooner than was absolutely necessary.

"A doctor, yes. The police can wait," I said abruptly.

"Just as you say, Mr. Davies," he returned with a leering smile. "I'll call Dr. Haskins."

He stepped to the table and picked up the phone and while he summoned the doctor I looked at him more

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attentively. He was just as Ruth had described him and instinctively distrust of this pale-faced secretary arose in my mind, distrust of him and his pussy-footing ways. I had not heard him enter the room behind me. For ought I knew to the contrary he might have been in the study when the shot was fired, sulking among the shadows in the corner while awaiting a chance to kill his employer. But then how in the name of all the gods had Ruth come by the pistol!

Which brought me back to the realization that I was still holding her unconscious form in my arms. I must carry her upstairs to her room. Yet I disliked intensely leaving the secretary alone with the dead, fearing I knew not what perversion of justice, dreading also that he might take the opportunity to summon the police before I was ready for them.

I glanced around the study and was relieved to find that the room possessed only one door, that by which I had entered, whose key was still in the lock, but on the inside. Ordering the secretary to lead the way to Ruth's apartments, I closed and locked the door of the study behind me, and pocketing the key followed him up the broad staircase.

Hardly had I laid Ruth upon her bed when a sharp ring startled me, and I glanced apprehensively at Orton. Could it be that others besides ourselves had heard the shot?

"No one could hear anything. The grounds are too extensive," he said, answering my unspoken thought. "That must be the doctor. He lives only a short distance from here."

Much as I disliked him I could have blessed him for those words, for already the plan to keep the police

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from questioning Ruth that night was simmering in my brain.

"Bring him here at once," I commanded, and Orton slipped noiselessly from the room.

I heard him opening the front door, heard the sound of voices apparently in consultation, and then the doctor's step upon the stair. I had expected an old family physician. The man who stepped briskly across the threshold was small and slight, almost a boy in years, yet having an air of knowing his business to perfection. Without ostentation, and also without asking needless questions, he examined Ruth quietly and attentively while I explained that she was suffering from the shock of having discovered her husband's murdered body.

"And, Doctor, could you not give her an opiate to insure a perfect night's rest," I added in a lower tone.

He gave me a swift appraising glance from his keen eyes, then as if satisfied, nodded to himself.

"Yes, I think you are right. It is far more important to save her reason than that the police should have the satisfaction of questioning her."

As he administered the dose to the now conscious girl I mentally decided that there was not very much that escaped this young doctor's observation.

"Is there no one to stay with Mrs. Darwin?" he inquired in a dissatisfied tone. "Where is her maid?"

"She sleeps in the servants' wing, Dr. Haskins," replied Orton.

"Go and get her," ordered the doctor briefly.

When the maid arrived on the scene, only half awake and very much tousled as if she had flung on her clothes without regard to appearance, the doctor bade her establish herself in the boudoir. Then satisfied that there would be someone within call in case of

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necessity, he asked to be conducted to the scene of the tragedy.

"You have notified the police?" questioned Dr. Haskins as we descended the stairs.

"No," I replied. "I waited to hear your verdict first."

"Better send for them at once," was his reply.

"I will do it, Dr. Haskins," put in the secretary eagerly.

As Orton moved to the hall phone I inserted the key in the lock of the study door and opened it with some trepidation, remembering what lay within. I had forgotten to turn out the lights and as we entered from the semi-obscurity of the hall, the chair and its horrible occupant seemed literally to spring out at us as we approached. To the doctor death was a familiar sight, but I could not bear to watch him as he probed the wound with skillful fingers, so I turned away and desirous of having something other than my thoughts to occupy my mind, I took cognizance for the first time of this room where the crime had been committed.

The study, as I remarked before, lay to the left of the hall and like its counterpart, the drawing-room, it was exceedingly large, a good forty feet in length at the very least. Again, like its counterpart, the side opening upon the garden was a series of French windows hung with velvet draperies of a rich brown that harmonized perfectly with the luxurious appointments of the room. Whatever one might say for his morals, one could certainly find no fault with Philip Darwin's taste in furnishing his study. It was the den of a sybarite, not the conventional study of the modern business man. The only jarring notes were supplied

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by the mahogany table directly in the center of the room, at whose head stood the chair in which the dead man lay, and by an immense safe let into the narrower wall, whose highly varnished surface reflected Darwin's face as clearly as any pier-glass would have done.

For a space I stood gazing at the safe, wondering what any man would want with such a gigantic contraption when I became conscious of the reflection of the doctor's occupation. With a feeling of nausea I swung away toward the windows when, struck by a sudden idea, I hastily examined them. It had occurred to me that while we were standing idle the murderer had probably made good his escape through one of them, since there was no other means of egress which he could have used with impunity. Imagine then my feelings to find that the windows were not only locked, but were also supplied with burglar alarms, which precluded beyond the shadow of a doubt their recent use by anyone intent upon escaping from the study!

With dwindling hope I tried the safe and finding that locked also, I returned to the table, where despite my aversion I could not help glancing at the man who, living, had destroyed my happiness and who, dead, was about to bereave me of all hope as well.

I had known Philip Darwin very slightly, a mere bowing acquaintance, so that it was a distinct shock to me to discover that he was so fine-looking a man. I had always accounted him handsome in a bold, dashing way, with his dark hair, his gold eyeglasses, and his neatly trimmed coal black Vandyke; but, death, that dread visitant that plays such queer tricks upon us mortals, had ennobled his countenance and rejuv-

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enated him by wiping away all traces of the dissipation which of late had coarsened his features and left its marks beneath his eyes and around his mouth. Had it not been for that red stain which seemed to mock me as I gazed, I would have said that he was merely asleep, so gracefully did he repose in the big chair, the left hand holding a small handkerchief upon his knee, the right flung out across the arm of the chair.

Just then I noticed that the doctor was gravely regarding the pistol as it lay on the floor beside the chair, and recalling where I had last seen it, I hesitantly asked the question whose answer I knew before the words had left my lips.

"Is there any possibility of suicide?"

"None at all," replied Dr. Haskins. "He has been shot through the left lung and death occurred from internal hemorrhage. The absence of powder stains and the fact that the bullet entered at an angle preclude the idea of suicide."

"Then Mr. Darwin was not killed instantly?" I asked.

"No. I should judge that he had lived at least twenty minutes after the shot was fired."

It could not have been more than twenty minutes, or at most, a half-hour since I had heard the report that had turned my world so suddenly upside down! Had he then been alive when I carried Ruth from the room? Had I locked him in to breathe his last alone, when perhaps I might have saved his life? The thought was too horrible to contemplate!

"Doctor!" I cried. "You mean he has only just died? That something could have been done to save him?"

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The doctor looked at me in some surprise. "Nothing could have been done to save him," he answered quietly. "From the condition of the body——"

But we had no time for further discussion for a great pounding had ensued at the front door and in a few-moments Orton returned with the police. There were five of them, the Sergeant and his two men and a couple of detectives from the Central Office, and they made an imposing array as they entered the room.

The Sergeant, a mild-looking man, nodded to us pleasantly enough, deplored the necessity which had brought him to the house, and ordered his men to guard the premises and to permit no one to leave the place under any circumstances, while the detectives made the rounds of the room, examining everything from the carpet to the ceiling.

"I do not believe I can be of further use," said Dr. Haskins. "Let me know when the inquest is called and I shall be glad to give my testimony."

The Sergeant took down his name and address, and, when the doctor was gone, turned to me and asked me who I was. I mentioned the name of the brokerage firm with which I was connected and of which I had the honor of being the junior partner. The name of that firm was a well-known one throughout the city and its effect upon the Sergeant was instantaneous. Glancing at me with marked respect he asked me to give him an account of the affair. It was precious little that I could tell him, however. I had been in the drawing-room, had heard the shot, and on rushing in had found Darwin dead.

While the Sergeant was transcribing this information in his notebook the younger of the two detectives,

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who had been glancing over the objects upon the table, spoke up.

"It was an inside job, then, Sergeant. The windows are all locked and anyone leaving by the door would have encountered this gentleman coming in," and he looked at me very suspiciously indeed.

The worthy Sergeant scratched his chin and looked perplexed. Then his eye fell on Orton standing meekly in the doorway.

"Hello, where the devil did you come from?" he asked.

"I—I'm the man who sent for you, who just let you in," he stammered, whether from fright or awe I don't know. "I'm Mr. Darwin's secretary."

"I see. What do you know about this affair?"

He was opening his mouth to say I know not what when he caught my eye. I was determined that Ruth should have a night's rest if I had to go to jail as the consequence.

"I heard the shot and when I entered the room Mr. Davies was looking at the body," he said with a malicious glance in my direction.

I could have laughed aloud as the Sergeant regarded me from beneath frowning brows. I was a prominent man and he dared not risk a false arrest.

"Are you the only two people awake in this house?" he inquired, to gain time.

"Mrs. Darwin heard the shot but she was prostrated by the news and the doctor does not wish her disturbed until morning," I said, purposely giving the wrong impression by my statement.

Again the Sergeant's troubled glance rested upon me. "What are you doing here at this time of night, Mr. Davies?" he asked abruptly.

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"I came here on important business," I answered.

At this juncture the older detective whispered something to the Sergeant and handed him a paper he had taken from the table drawer.

"Mr. Davies, I am under the painful necessity of keeping you under surveillance until the arrival of the coroner. You will remain in this house until that time."

I bowed. "Then you have no objections to my retiring?" I asked.

"None at all, Mr. Davies. Gregory," he called, and when the burly policeman appeared in the doorway, "You will accompany Mr. Davies to his room and see that he does not attempt to leave the house."

"Very good, sir," saluted the policeman.

"Good night, Sergeant," I said. "I am sorry to put you to so much trouble." Then I touched Orton upon the shoulder. "If you will be so kind I should like to be shown to a vacant room and might I borrow a suit of pajamas?"

I linked my arm through his and forced him to accompany me upstairs. By dint of hinting that he had no way of proving that he was not in the study at the fatal moment and that my word had far more weight than his, should I choose to cast suspicion upon him, I frightened the cowardly fellow into promising to keep his knowledge to himself for that night at least. That the police were bound to learn that Ruth was also in the study was inevitable, but at any rate I should have gained her a few more hours of freedom, for whichever way I looked at it the case was black against her.

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CHAPTER IV

THE INQUEST

When I awoke the sun was pouring into the room and my watch pointed to eleven o'clock. After hours of pacing the floor in utter anguish of spirit while the specter of murder stalked hand-in-hand with innocence and love, outraged nature had asserted herself and I had found respite in oblivion. But now the weary round of thoughts must be taken up again and it was with a sigh of relief that I obeyed the summons to present myself in the study where the coroner was holding the inquest.

The body had been removed and in the chair where it had so lately rested reposed the coroner with his papers spread out on the table before him. I noticed that he had taken the chair from the head of the table and had placed it around the corner on the right side, facing the direction of the door instead of the safe.

In the corner opposite the door sat the younger of the two detectives who had accompanied the Sergeant to the house the night before. Beside him was Orton, looking pale and dispirited, while huddled in the adjacent corner like a herd of frightened cattle stood the servants, their eyes fastened upon the coroner, watching his every movement as if in terror lest they be accused of having murdered their master. Grouped around the table but slightly behind the coroner sat the jury, and I was glad to note that the coroner had had the good sense to pick a fairly respectable set of

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men to judge the case, from which I argued hopefully that the gray-haired, heavy-set gentleman in charge of the case might possess a modicum of intelligence and a keener brain than the average coroner.

Back of the jury stood Dr. Haskins, in conference with a rotund individual whom I assumed rightly to be the coroner's physician. Beyond the doctors sat the assistant district attorney, surrounded by the very few newspapermen who had got wind of the affair and had insisted upon being present.

Passing the jury I seated myself near one of the windows beside a man whom I recalled having seen, but whom I could not at the moment place, and looked around in vain for Ruth. Evidently Coroner Graves (I obtained this information from the man beside me) intended to spare her as much as possible, for which consideration I thanked him from the bottom of my heart.

They must have been awaiting my presence since I was no sooner seated than the coroner called on Doctor Haskins to give his testimony. The doctor repeated what he had previously told me, that Philip Darwin had been shot through the left lung, that death had resulted from internal hemorrhage, and that the victim had lived at least twenty minutes after the bullet had penetrated his body. Asked if he had examined Mr. Darwin immediately upon his arrival, the doctor replied that he had first attended Mrs. Darwin and that it must have been ten or fifteen minutes later that he had entered the study. He had found Mr. Darwin lying back in his chair with a smile on his lips, one hand closed over a handkerchief, the other hanging limply over the arm of the chair. From

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the condition of the body he must have been dead from twenty to thirty minutes. Also there was a small abrasion on the little finger of his left hand, as if a ring had been violently removed. Questioned as to whether he was the family's physician, he said no, that he only knew Mr. Darwin by sight and had probably been summoned because he was the nearest doctor.

This evidence was partially corroborated by the coroner's physician, who added that he had made a post-mortem examination and had extracted the bullet, which had narrowly missed entering the heart. From the nature of the wound it would have been impossible for him to have shot himself, and the absence of all powder stains pointed to murder rather than suicide.

Then he continued, with a slightly commiserating look in Dr. Haskins' direction: "You have heard Dr. Haskins' testimony, your honor, that the victim lived twenty minutes after he was shot, and that at the time that the doctor examined him he had already been dead from twenty to thirty minutes. This last statement is correct. The post-mortem examination proves conclusively that Mr. Darwin died at midnight or shortly thereafter. From questions that I have already put to Mr. Orton I have learned that the shot was fired as the clock finished striking twelve, therefore since that was the only shot fired Mr. Darwin must have died immediately, or at the best, must have lived only five minutes, for Dr. Haskins was in the study by twelve-thirty."

"But," interrupted Dr. Haskins, "the nature of the wound is such that instantaneous death could not have possibly occurred."

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"Please do not volunteer information unless you are being questioned," returned the coroner with some asperity. He turned to his physician, "You were saying, Doctor?"

Dr. Haskins shrugged his shoulders at the coroner's words, while his boyish face flushed angrily at the rebuke, and he walked away from the table, but turned to listen as the physician took up the cudgels again by answering the query he had propounded.

"Dr. Haskins is young in his profession and this is his first criminal case, hence his natural inference that because in his medical books such a wound should produce such results, therefore it must be so in practice," said the coroner's physician, with pompous superiority. "Now as a matter of fact where one man will live an hour another will survive only a few minutes, depending on the life each has led. Now Mr. Darwin, I have been told, led a very fast life, which probably accounts for his quick demise. After all, you see, it's a question of fitting your facts to the circumstances of your case and in this instance no other conclusion is possible."

I could see that Dr. Haskins was not at all convinced, and I set it down to professional jealousy and his desire not to be outdone by the coroner's physician. I can imagine that that "is young in his profession" rather stuck in his gorge.

When the physician had seated himself the coroner took up the bullet and called the detective, to whom he handed it along with another object that had been lying upon the table. Whereupon the detective took a step forward and held up the object for our inspection. It was a long-barreled thirty-eight caliber revol-

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ver, just the sort of weapon a man would keep in his house for use against burglars, since it insured a fair chance of more accurate marksmanship.

"This revolver, gentlemen," said the detective, speaking to the jury, "was found on the floor beside the chair in which the victim lay. As you can see for yourselves," here he broke the pistol, "it is fully loaded with the exception of one chamber, which has recently been discharged. The bullet extracted from Mr. Darwin's body corresponds in every respect with the bullets remaining in this pistol. Therefore I have no hesitation in stating that the deceased was killed with this weapon in my hand."

He passed the revolver and the bullet to the jury, adding that Mr. Darwin had been standing when he was shot, and that as he had been engaged in writing the moment before, the inference was plain that he had risen to meet the person who killed him.

"What makes you certain he was standing when he was shot?" inquired the coroner.

"The carpet, if you'll notice," replied the detective, whose name, by the way, was Jones, "has a very heavy pile. The marks made by that arm-chair as it was pushed back from the table were apparent to me when I examined the carpet around it. Now Mr. Darwin had been writing, for we found a half-finished word on the paper before him, and must therefore have been seated in the chair. Hence the only person who could have produced those marks in the carpet was the victim himself, and they could only have been made if, as I said, he had risen suddenly to meet his murderer, who was evidently known to him, since Mr. Darwin was smiling when he was killed."

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There was a murmur of admiration for the clever way in which he had deduced his statement, and the man beside me softly clapped his hands as he whispered to himself, "admirable, marvelous. Upon my soul I could not have builded better had I tried."

The thought came to me that my companion might be a detective also, and that he was delighted with the intelligence displayed by his professional brother, but I had no time to nurse idle speculations, for Jones had resumed his seat, and I expected the coroner to make an attempt to discover the ownership of the pistol. To my surprise he ignored that point and turned his attention to the servants.

The butler, who was the first servant called upon and who was a vigorous old man about sixty years of age, gave his name as George Mason and stated that he had been in his position for thirty years. I saw the coroner's face clear at this statement, for surely a man who had been the family retainer for so long a time could be relied on not to pervert any knowledge he might possess of the events of the previous night. The coroner should have recalled that though not given to perverting justice old family servants have a faculty for forgetting what they would rather not explain.

"I understand that it is your duty to secure the house at night," began the coroner.

"Yes, sir."

"What time do you usually lock up?"

"When Mr. Darwin left the house for the evening, sir. Or if he was away, as he sometimes is, for days together, it would remain locked while he was gone. That is, it was that way before his marriage, sir. Now I lock up when Mrs. Darwin goes upstairs."

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"What time did you close the house last night?"

"At nine-thirty, sir."

"You are sure you locked all the doors and windows securely?"

"Oh, yes, sir, everything except the study, for to my surprise Mr. Orton was in there and said he'd lock the windows himself, sir."

"Why did Mr. Orton's presence in the study surprise you?"

"Because Mr. Darwin always keeps the study locked, sir. I have a duplicate key to let the maid in to clean, sir, and it was my custom in my rounds at night to knock on the door. If I got no answer I went in to see that everything was all right, sir."

"How long has Mr. Darwin been in the habit of locking his study?"

"A good many years, sir, ten or more."

"For what reason?"

"I do not know, sir."

"Did Mr. Orton explain how he came to be in the study?"

"No, sir. When I found him there I withdrew at once."

"After that, what did you do?"

"I saw to it that all the servants had left the main wing and closed the door into the servants' wing. When that door is closed it is impossible to hear what goes on in the main part of the house, sir. We went to bed and did not know the master was dead until Mr. Orton informed us this morning, sir."

"I see. This applies to all the servants, you can swear to that?"

"Yes, sir, to all except the valet and Mrs. Darwin's

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maid. They do not leave the main wing until dismissed for the night."

"Who opened up the house this morning?"

"The police, sir."

The coroner looked inquiringly at the detective, who answered promptly: "Nothing had been tampered with. The burglar alarms on the windows were all intact and the front door was double-locked when the doctor arrived."

The coroner turned once more to the butler. "When did you last see Mr. Darwin alive?"

"Yesterday about six o'clock, sir. He was just going out."

"Then he was not home for dinner?"

"No, sir. Mr. Orton and Mrs. Darwin dined alone, sir, for even Mr. Lee was away."

"Who is Mr. Lee?"

"Mr. Darwin's nephew, sir. He has lived here ever since he was a lad, sir."

Coroner Graves pondered a moment, then asked abruptly, "Have you ever noticed any signs of ill-feeling between your master and mistress?"

The answer came without a moment's hesitation, "No, sir, and even if I did it was not my place, begging your pardon, sir, to pry into the affairs of my betters."

The jury smiled, but the coroner frowned as he told Mason that he was through questioning him, for he was evidently a stickler in regard to upholding the dignity of the law as embodied in his own proper person, of course.

The examination of the other servants was a mere formality. None of them knew anything of the tragedy

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and they were disposed of in a group with the exception of the valet and Ruth's maid.

The former, being questioned, stated that his master had given him the evening, that he had left the house at six and had not returned until eight this morning. Where had he been at midnight, why at the Highfling, on Fourteenth Street, dancing with his girl.

The coroner summoned a policeman and sent him out to verify this statement, then called Ruth's maid, who supplied him with the first bit of tangible evidence against her mistress.

"How long have you been in your present position, Annie?" he asked, glancing at the sheet he held in his hand.

"Five months, sir," answered Annie, with a grin and curtsey. She was quite a pretty girl and it was evident that she was bursting to tell all she knew, so the coroner asked her to relate everything that had happened the night before, admonishing her to be careful not to forget a single detail.

She tossed her head. "As if I'm like to forget, sir, with it all ending in murder, sir." She spoke the word in a thrilling whisper, enjoying to the full her connection with so sensational an affair.

"Last night, sir, about ten-thirty, as I was getting my mistress ready for bed, came a knock at the door and who should it be but Mr. Orton, saying that the master wished to see my mistress in the study. Quick as a wink she was after him down the stairs, and I hadn't hardly had time to fix the bed before she was back again——"

"Be more definite," interrupted the coroner. "Was she gone five minutes?"

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"Nearer ten, sir," came the ready answer.

"Were you making the bed that it took you ten minutes to fix it?" inquired the coroner, sharply.

The girl hung her head. "No, sir. I went out in the hall to see if I could hear anything, but there was no sound and when I saw my mistress coming up the stairs I ran back in the room and noticed the clock said about twenty to eleven, sir."

"Be careful how you give false impressions, my girl. Remember that we always learn the truth," said the coroner, severely.

The girl was quite abashed and just a little frightened. "It wasn't any harm, sir," she murmured, "and I didn't hear anything, so I thought it didn't have to be told."

"Go on with your story," shortly.

"Yes, sir. My mistress came back looking very excited and sat down at her desk. She wrote something on a paper and put it in a white envelope, then she told me to give it to her chauffeur and to tell him to go for Mr. Davies and bring him back as fast as possible. She said I needn't come back to her, so I did what she told me and then went to bed. I don't know how long I'd been asleep when Mr. Orton woke me and told me my mistress was ill. I flung on some clothes and followed him to her room, where the doctor told me to stay the rest of the night. I didn't know the master was dead until I went to get my breakfast. The butler told me, and that is all I know, sir."

"You have no idea what was in the note?"

"No, sir. It was sealed."

The chauffeur was called next and testified that what the maid had related with regard to him was

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correct. He had taken the note to my house and delivered it to my man. When I had entered the machine he had driven me to the Darwin home and left me at the front steps.

"Did the maid give you Mr. Davies' address?" asked an inquisitive juror.

"No, sir. I was Mrs. Darwin's chauffeur before her marriage and had often driven Mr. Davies home, sir."

"Then Mr. Davies was acquainted with Mrs. Darwin before her marriage?" This from another juror.

"Yes, sir."

"Did you not think it odd that your mistress should send for Mr. Davies at that time of night?" inquired the coroner.

"I didn't think about it one way or 'tother. I'm paid to obey orders, sir."

There was nothing more to be obtained from him and as by this time it had grown late a short recess was called for luncheon. I had hoped to see Ruth, but I was disappointed for she kept her room and so, not caring to join the others in the dining-room, I had Mason bring me a bite in the room adjoining the study.

When the inquest was reopened I once more took a chair near a window but above the table instead of below it, where I could watch more closely the witnesses as they were called. To my surprise my companion of the morning again chose a seat beside me.

Then the coroner rapped for order and inquired if Gregory had returned.

"Yes, sir," answered the policeman promptly, coming forward and saluting. "The valet's alibi is O. K., sir. The music hall attendant remembers speaking to

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him at midnight, and his girl corroborated his testimony."

"Very well. That effectually disposes of the servants," remarked the coroner. "Now for the more important witnesses."

I was hoping that he would call me first, but the name that fell from his lips was that of Claude Orton, private secretary and creature of the murdered man.

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CHAPTER V

THE SECRETARY

WHAT was Orton going to say? How many of last night's events had come under his notice? I had no recollection of having seen him until he had turned on the study lights, yet Ruth had been manifestly uneasy and had thought that she had heard his step in the hall. Where had he been when Ruth left the drawing-room and how close was he to the scene of the tragedy when the shot was fired? But all this was idle conjecture. I would know soon enough what I had to fear from this man, and as I caught the ugly gleam in his prominent eyes when he turned them for an instant my way I realized that he would do his very best to hurt me. My peremptory manner last night would be paid back in full, measure for measure, and he was cunning enough to guess that he could wound me most through Ruth.

"You are Mr. Darwin's secretary?" the coroner was saying when I was once more cognizant of my surroundings.

"I am his private secretary. I have charge of his business affairs," with a trace of condescension beneath his apparent humility.

"Where do you discharge your duties?"

"At his office in Broad Street. I attend to his correspondence."

"Is it not odd that a man of Mr. Darwin's—er—wealth—should introduce his secretary on an equal footing with his family?"

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The secretary squirmed and the man beside me grinned delightedly through his forest of red whiskers.

"I am a distant connection of the family," answered Orton. "I—er—he asked me to make my home with him a month ago."

"And how long have you been in his employ?"

"About two months."

"You are then acquainted with his private affairs also?"

"Not at all, only those relating to his business."

"And what is this business you are always talking about?" inquired the coroner ironically. In his opinion rich men evidently had no need of occupation.

"He was director of the Darwin Bank," answered Orton, discomfited. "He also played on the market."

"A speculator, eh? Did he also play fast and loose in his domestic affairs?" continued the coroner with a shrewdness I should not have given him credit for.

For a moment Orton was puzzled, then a great light dawned upon him and he laughed feebly. "Yes, he was not on good terms with his wife, if that is what you mean. He was not what you would call a model husband."

"What an infernal idiot that fellow is," said the man beside me with a sneer, but I was too much concerned with what Orton would reveal to take any interest in side comments.

"You testified last night that you had heard the shot?" remarked the coroner, changing the subject abruptly. "Where were you at that particular time?"

"On the stairs. I had been doing some work in the little room beyond the study and on my way to my room had paused on the lower step to count the strokes

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of the hall clock. Just as I finished counting twelve the shot rang out," answered Orton very humbly, as if anxious to efface his personality from the minds of his listeners.

"What did you do then?"

"My first impulse was to flee up the stairs. I am a timid man and dislike the sight of bloodshed. But sometime previously I had heard a step in the hall and looking out had seen Mrs. Darwin enter the study. Fearing that it was she who was hurt I followed Mr. Davies into the study."

He wiped his brow with a trembling hand and I mentally decided that he had had a bad minute concocting that piece of testimony—for one part of it at least was a decided fabrication. Ruth had been in the study only a minute and had not gone in some time before, as he tried to imply.

"Mr. Davies entered ahead of you? Where did he come from?" queried the coroner.

"He was in the drawing-room, which is nearer the study than the stairs, and so he reached the room first, but he paused at the door for a minute and I was right behind him when he spoke to Mrs. Darwin."

"What did he say to Mrs. Darwin?"

"He cried out, 'Ruth!' and she dropped something shiny from her hand and fainted. While Mr. Davies picked her up I turned on the light and noticed for the first time that Mr. Darwin was dead."

Another prevarication! He could no more have helped knowing who had been shot than I if he was right behind me as he said!

"The study was in darkness then?"

"No. There was a small lamp lighted on the table

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but it did not give sufficient light to distinguish clearly the rest of the room."

"And when you turned on the light how many persons were in the room?"

"Just Mr. Davies, Mrs. Darwin, and I."

"Might there not have been someone else who left by the windows before you lighted the room?"

"No, for I locked the windows at Mr. Darwin's request a half-hour before, and they were still locked when the police arrived."

"Could anyone have escaped by the door then?"

"Impossible, for I should have seen that person. Besides, Mr. Davies was at the door almost immediately after the shot was fired."

"You said Mrs. Darwin had something shiny in her hand. Were you able to tell what it was?"

"Yes, it was a pistol," he said, with a triumphant look in my direction.

"That's a lie!" cried a man's voice, and Ruth's chauffeur detached himself from the group of servants to shake a finger beneath Orton's nose. "It's a lie, you miserable little worm! Take it back or I'll wring your neck!"

I think he would have done it, too, had not a policeman thrust him out into the hall, where he remained to curse Orton roundly before he moved away. A servant's loyalty to a sweet and gentle mistress, and I determined it should not go unrewarded, for nowadays such loyalty is rare.

The murmur of approval that followed this act showing in what odium the secretary was held by the servants, made the coroner a little doubtful of his man

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and more than ever anxious that his statement be properly substantiated.

"Have you any reason to suspect Mrs. Darwin other than the fact that she held the pistol in her hand?" he asked after due deliberation.

"She knew that Mr. Darwin kept a pistol in the drawer of this table and she had quarreled with him an hour and a half before," replied Orton with a triumphant expresson on his pale face.

"She quarreled with him, you say? Tell me all you know about it."

"Mr. Darwin was away for dinner and I believe he returned about ten-thirty, but of this I cannot be absolutely sure, since he has a key of his own and I was in the study with the door closed."

"What were you doing in the study?" interrupted the coroner.

"I was answering some letters which Mr. Darwin had left for me," replied Orton.

"Mason testified that the study was usually kept locked," continued the coroner. "Have you also a duplicate key?"

"No, I have no key. He told me he would leave the door open for me and he unlocked it before he left the house," returned Orton, quietly.

"Go on with your story."

"At ten-thirty Mr. Darwin entered the study and told me to call Mrs. Darwin," resumed Orton. "She, as you know, answered the summons. At first they talked in low tones, but presently from their raised voices I knew that they were quarreling and quarreling bitterly, for I heard Mr. Darwin threaten to do something or other to Mr. Davies. Then Mrs. Darwin

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opened the door and rushed upstairs and Mr. Darwin called me to him. He said that he was expecting a visitor but wished me to watch Mrs. Darwin's movements and, when he summoned me, to report them to him. After which he closed and locked the door. It was then that I heard Mrs. Darwin telling her maid to make haste. I hurried to the back stairs and followed Annie to the garage where I heard her instructions to the chauffeur. Coming back to the house I hung around the darkened hall and while I waited I heard voices in the study, but I was unable to distinguish whose they were. Then Mrs. Darwin came downstairs and I drew back into the little room next the study to await developments. She lighted the drawing-room and about eleven-twenty-five she opened the front door, admitted Mr. Davies, locked the door, and led him into the drawing-room. It must have been about five minutes later that Mr. Darwin called me to the study and asked for my report. He was seated in that chair leaning back with his pen in his hand and in just the same position as we found him when he had been shot. I told him what I had seen and he laughed and clapped his hands softly as if something tickled his fancy."

" 'So we've a broker in the house, eh?' he said. 'He should know how to play fast and loose, eh? I'll make him useful, this broker lover of our stainless Ruth!' "

Orton got no further. It was more than flesh and blood could endure to sit and hear him repeat that odious man's remarks in that softly insinuating voice.

"Stop!" I cried, springing to my feet. "Your honor, I protest against such things being dragged into this court of inquiry!"

"That will do, Mr. Davies," said the coroner stiffly.

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But I believe he feared to antagonize me too far, for he said to Orton, "You need not repeat Mr. Darwin's conversation."

Orton bowed obsequiously in deference to his superior. Ugh, how I despised him!

"It was then that he told me to lock the windows and he was laughing when I left the room," finished Orton.

"Do you know what occasioned the quarrel between the husband and wife?" suddenly inquired the inquisitive juror.

"It was a love-letter that Mrs. Darwin had written to Mr. Davies," said Orton.

I think the coroner was afraid he was going to divulge its contents, for he interposed hurriedly, "Did anyone else know that the pistol was kept in this table drawer?"

"No, only Mrs. Darwin and myself."

"Is this the pistol in question?" pointing to the revolver.

"Yes. It belongs to Mr. Darwin and has his initials engraved on the handle."

The coroner nodded in confirmation. "Do you recognize this handkerchief?" holding up a dainty lace-covered bit of cambric partly stained with blood.

"I have seen Mrs. Darwin carry one like it."

"Are you and Mrs. Darwin the only members of the household?"

"We were last night. Mrs. Darwin's father has been away for two weeks on a vacation, and Lee Darwin, Mr. Darwin's nephew, left the house yesterday morning."

"What do you mean?"

"He had a dispute with his uncle and I overheard

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Mr. Darwin tell Lee to get out and stay out, which he promptly did. He went to the Yale Club and has not been back since."

"That is all, Mr. Orton. Gregory," called the coroner.

"Yes, sir," answered that worthy.

"Go to the Yale Club and inquire for Mr. Lee Darwin. If possible bring him here."

"Very good, sir."

When the policeman had gone the coroner turned to me. "Now, Mr. Davies, we will hear what you have to say."

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CHAPTER VI

CORROBORATIVE EVIDENCE

How I wished that I had been born blind, or failing that, that I had been a thousand miles away when that fatal shot was fired! A coward's attitude? Perhaps, but for the life of me at that moment I could not see how my testimony could be anything but damaging to the girl I loved.

"Mr. Davies, will you tell the jury what happened last night," said the coroner.

Very calmly I told them all that had happened, saying that I was a life-long friend of Ruth, that she had asked me to come to the house, and that in the course of conversation I had urged her to get me a paper which was of value to me. She entered the study and almost immediately the shot rang out. I ran to the door and found her standing beside her husband. The shock of his death caused her to faint and I carried her from the room.

When I was through, the coroner stroked his chin reflectively. I was hoping he would dismiss me without further parley, but instead he began his cross-examination.

"Mr. Davies, did you not think it strange that she should send for you so late at night?" he commenced, after a slight pause.

"Under the circumstances, no," I replied.

"Under what circumstances?"

"In the interview between Mr. and Mrs. Darwin,

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of which you have heard, Mr. Darwin threatened to ruin me. Mrs. Darwin sent for me because she desired to warn me against her husband."

I saw several of the jurymen nudging each other and even the coroner's brows shot up a trifle, but I decided that it was far better to strengthen the case against her than to have them construing all manner of scandal from my refusal to answer.

"Could she not have written to warn you, just as well?" pursued the coroner.

"She believed that I would take no notice of such a warning unless it were given in person," I replied.

"Would not the next morning have been ample time?" caustically.

"I can't presume to say," I shrugged.

"You were acquainted with Mrs. Darwin before her marriage. Was it merely in the capacity of her friend?" He spoke diffidently, as if anxious not to offend my sensibilities.

I debated the point and finally came to the conclusion that there was no object in airing the family skeleton, more particularly as it might get Dick into trouble with the authorities and thus set at naught Ruth's dearly bought sacrifice.

I bowed therefore and replied quietly, "Yes, your honor, I was merely her friend."

The coroner gave me a swift glance from beneath half-closed lids as he fingered a sheet of paper thoughtfully.

"You said that Mrs. Darwin entered the study to reclaim a paper which was of value to you, did you not?" he inquired.

"Yes," I answered, briefly.

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"Is this the paper?" he continued in a peculiar tone, holding up the letter that Ruth had described to me.

"I have no idea," I retorted.

"What do you mean by that?" he continued sharply.

"Mrs. Darwin simply told me that in the study-table drawer was a letter which her husband could use against me. I urged her to retrieve it. Never having seen it I cannot possibly say whether the paper in your hand is the one or not," I returned, quietly.

For a moment he was nonplussed, and then he asked: "You heard Mr. Orton say it was a love-letter written to you by Mrs. Darwin?"

"Oh, yes, but I didn't hear you ask him how he knew this. No, nor did I hear him tell you that he fished the torn scraps of Mrs. Darwin's private correspondence from her basket and pieced it together for her husband's delectation," I replied, scornfully, glad of the chance to let the jury know the truth concerning that letter.

I saw the look of disgust with which various of the members of the jury favored Orton, and even the coroner was impressed to the point of laying the letter aside and resuming his attack upon a different line.

"When you sent Mrs. Darwin into the study you were both aware, of course, of Mr. Darwin's presence in that room?"

"No. Mr. Darwin had told his wife he was going out and we had no idea there was anyone in the study."

"But finding him there unexpectedly might she not have shot him to secure the letter?" pursued the relentless voice.

I shook my head and replied abruptly (I have

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learned since that he had no right to ask that question, but I had no knowledge of legal technicalities): "Impossible. She was in the study only a minute before the shot was fired. This I am positive of, Mr. Orton's evidence to the contrary. She had left the door slightly ajar and I remember listening for sounds from the study just before the clock struck twelve. I heard no voices. Besides, the study was in total darkness——"

"You are sure the study was in darkness?" he interrupted with an odd look.

"Yes, I think I can safely say it was."

"It has been proven that Mr. Darwin was writing just before he was shot. Do you think he was in the habit of writing in the dark?" he inquired sarcastically.

I reddened. The detective's statement had slipped my mind, but I refused to be ridiculed into changing my opinion. I could have staked my life upon it that the study was dark.

"Of course I was not in the room itself," I returned stiffly, "but by the hesitating way in which Mrs. Darwin entered and from the fact that no glow came through the doorway as she opened the door, I judged that the study was in darkness."

"The lamp on this table could never give sufficient light to be seen from that doorway, Mr. Davies," remarked the coroner.

I shook my head impatiently. "Nevertheless, I am convinced the study was in darkness," I reiterated stubbornly.

Seeing that he was getting nowhere he dropped the point, and asked: "Did you also see the pistol in Mrs. Darwin's hand?"

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There was no use in quibbling since the fact was known, and I had no idea of what Ruth herself would say on this point, so I replied in the affirmative, adding: "As I stood in the doorway I could see that Mr. Darwin had been shot as plainly as I could see that Mrs. Darwin was standing beside his chair."

"I thought you said the study was in darkness?"

"It was, but the lamp was lighted as I sprang for the door."

"Then you think there may have been someone else in the room?"

"Yes."

"Could you see the door of the study from your position in the drawing-room?"

"Yes." What was he getting at, anyway?

"So that you could see whether anyone came out of the study, or entered it after Mrs. Darwin?"

"Yes."

"Did anyone come out or go in?"

"No."

"You heard the evidence concerning the windows?"

"Yes."

"Do you still persist in saying there was someone else in the study?"

So that was it. He was trying to trap me into making a contradictory statement to pay up for my stubbornness concerning the study. But I had no intention of being trapped by him.

"I cannot be absolutely positive, your honor," I said, "but of this I am certain. I had no knowledge of Mr. Orton's presence until he lighted the study. Whether he was already in the room when Mrs. Darwin went in,

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or whether he entered behind me, I am not prepared to say."

"That's not so!" cried Orton, his face more pallid than ever. "I was out in the hall, your honor, I was out in the hall!"

The detective said something to him in an undertone, whereupon he subsided tremblingly, but it was very plain to be seen that the coroner, who had not been previously impressed with the man and who had since come to regard him in the light of a sycophant, began to be suspicious of the secretary, eyeing him with great disfavor, wondering, no doubt, whether he were as innocent as he gave out. I began to breathe more freely for Ruth, but at the coroner's next words my hopes were dashed once more.

"Knowing that Mrs. Darwin was in the study, why did you give the police the impression last night that she had heard the shot from upstairs?"

"She was ill. I didn't want her disturbed," I explained.

"In other words, you feared to tell the truth," he commented.

I made no answer. Protestations would only have made a bad matter worse.

"Mr. Davies, you know, of course, that if a man dies intestate, his wife inherits his property?"

I nodded, but was decidedly puzzled.

"Mr. Darwin died intestate," he continued quietly, watching to note the effect upon me.

"I don't understand you," I said, and I spoke the truth. I was out of my depth, for he surely couldn't suppose that I was intimately acquainted with Philip Darwin's personal affairs! Either that, or else he pos-

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sessed information of which I had no knowledge. It proved to be the latter case.

"In the waste basket we found partially burned scraps of what was presumably a will, Mr. Davies, and here," holding up a heavy paper, "is what Mr. Darwin was at work upon when he was shot. It is a will, Mr. Davies, or rather the beginning of one, and it is not in Mrs. Darwin's favor."

I made no comment, but I could see what he was driving at. This was another powerful factor to be added to Ruth's motive in taking her husband's life.

"This will is in favor of Cora Manning. Did you ever hear of her, Mr. Davies?" continued the coroner.

"I can't say that I have."

"Do you also identify this handkerchief?"

"No, I have never seen it before to my knowledge."

"It might be Mrs. Darwin's?"

"I don't know."

"That is all at present. Mr. Cunningham, please."

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CHAPTER VII

THE LAWYER

At the coroner's words the man beside me arose and walked to the front of the room. He was about Philip Darwin's build and height, but his face was fleshier, and he wore a full, square beard of a peculiar mottled red, the same shade as his hair, as though both had been liberally sprinkled with gray. He was very fastidiously dressed, I might say almost foppishly so, even to the point of wearing spats and an eyeglass, which he was continually screwing into his eye as he spoke.

"You are Mr. Darwin's lawyer?" asked the coroner.

"Yes. You will pardon me if I reply rather briefly. I have a bad throat to-day and find it trying to speak at length," he apologized in a husky voice.

"Certainly, certainly. This is a mere formality," responded the coroner affably, whereat the lawyer smiled, rather sardonically, I thought.

"Mr. Cunningham, do you know whether the will that was destroyed was in Mrs. Darwin's favor?"

"It was."

"Are you absolutely certain?"

"Yes. I made it out when Mr. Darwin was married."

"Do you know whether Mr. Darwin keeps any of his valuable papers in that safe?"

"I am sure he keeps nothing of value in it. His papers are in his vault at the bank."

"Have you none, then?"

The lawyer shook his head and replaced his eyeglass

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with great deliberation. "Two nights ago Mr. Darwin removed the last of his securities from my office," he said with evident difficulty.

"The last of his securities? Do you mean that he had been gradually removing them from your care?"

This time the lawyer nodded.

"For what purpose?" asked the coroner.

"I do not know," was the candid answer. "He was rather secretive. I surmised he needed them in his dealings in Wall Street."

"He did not actually say so?"

"No. He told me nothing."

"Since he was so secretive, might he not have put some of his securities in that safe?"

"No, I don't think so. However, you might have it opened—to satisfy yourself," with a slight, rather mocking accent on the last word.

"I think it just as well," responded the coroner, briskly. "Mr. Cunningham, you don't by any chance happen to know the combination?"

"No, I do not."

"Jones, can you open that safe?" inquired the coroner.

"I think so." The detective rose and advanced down the long room to the safe, where he knelt down, the better to hear the fall of the tumblers. While he twirled the knob of the dial now this way and now that, Mr. Cunningham, as if in no way interested, moved to the window, where he stood looking out with his back to the room. Now it happened that I was sitting so that I could see his reflection in the window-pane, and I was surprised to note the look of diabolical joy that overspread his countenance as he rubbed his hands together in unholy glee, for it seemed to me that

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such levity was decidedly out of place at this particular time.

But now my attention was diverted, for the detective straightened to his full height and opened the safe door, which swung back on noiseless hinges. As the detective darted within the cavernous depths, the lawyer turned toward the room once more with a remnant of his smile on his lips as he stroked his beard with a well-kept white hand. And then it flashed across me where I had seen him before. It was on the Knickerbocker Roof, late one evening in September, where I was supping with my partner after the show. Cunningham had come in with a couple of chorus girls and my partner had mentioned that he was a gay old boy, to which I had agreed after watching him as he stroked his beard and made love to the girls. I had not seen him since that night, roof gardens not being much in my line, and so, of course, I had failed to remember him until that gesture which seemed habitual with him recalled him to my mind.

"Nothing, your honor," reported the detective, emerging with a crestfallen face. "Nothing but a few receipted tailor's bills, an empty cash box and a stoneless ring."

"A what?" The coroner screwed himself around in his chair and the jury strained backward as Jones spoke.

Mr. Cunningham involuntarily put out his hand for the bauble as the detective passed him, but Jones shook his head with a smile, as he returned to the front of the room and placed the objects on the table before the coroner.

Coroner Graves examined with meticulous care the sheaf of bills, the empty box. Then he put them aside

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and turned his attention to the stoneless ring.

"Odd, very odd," he said. "Why should a man like Mr. Darwin preserve a stoneless ring?"

"I think I can explain that," said the lawyer, coming forward very leisurely. "May I look at it?" He held out his hand and the coroner placed the ring within it. "Ah, yes, it is the same." He handed it back with a courteous air, but I could not help feeling that somehow he was merely amused by the attempts of the coroner to solve the problem. But it must have been my own overwrought fancy, for his voice was sinister enough through its throatiness, as he said:

"My client, as perhaps you know, was very fond of the ladies. Before his marriage he met a very beautiful young lady—her name does not matter, it was not her own, for she was an actress, I believe—of whom he became very fond. In fact, he told me he was going to engage himself to her, and showed me that ring which he had bought her. It held within that now broken setting a magnificent blue-white diamond. If you will look within you will see the inscription which Mr. Darwin had engraved upon it."

He paused, as much to rest his voice as to give the coroner the opportunity of reading aloud for the benefit of the jury the sentiment which graced the ring: "To my one love—D."

"I remonstrated with him, told him she would take the ring and leave him high and dry, but he would not listen and bestowed it upon her," resumed the lawyer. "A week later he received a letter from her enclosing that." He waved his hand toward the golden circlet contemptuously. "She had kept the diamond and returned him his ring. She left the country and he never heard from her again. Why he kept that empty shell

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I don't know. Perhaps he put it in the safe and forgot it was there."

"Where did you find it, Jones?" asked the coroner.

"In one corner of the top shelf. I only discovered it because as I passed my hand over the shelf the broken prong scratched me," replied Jones.

The coroner nodded. "A thin bit of gold not worth considering," he said, adding as the lawyer was about to return to his seat: "Mr. Cunningham, do you know Mr. Darwin's nephew?"

"Yes, I have met him several times," responded the lawyer.

"Was there not a will in his favor before the wedding?"

"Yes, but it was destroyed when the new will was made."

"Did Mr. Darwin mention to you recently that he intended changing his will?"

"No."

"Have you ever heard of Cora Manning?"

"No."

"Yet Mr. Darwin had written her name on the will he was making at the time he was shot, Mr. Cunningham."

"Indeed? This is all news to me, sir. My client, as perhaps you have heard, was exceedingly peculiar. He did not confide all his affairs to me. In fact, he often employed more than one lawyer."

The coroner raised his brows. "Well, he certainly was peculiar if he did that. One lawyer ought to be enough for any sane man."

"Quite right," responded Mr. Cunningham with an odd smile. "But perhaps my client wasn't quite sane."

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CHAPTER VIII

LEE DARWIN

THE coroner's retort, if he made one, was lost to me, for at this moment loud voices were heard in the hall and a burly policeman came hurriedly into the room.

"What is it, Riley?" asked the coroner in an annoyed tone.

"Beggin' yer pardon, sorr, but there's a young man out here and a divil of a strong young man he is, yer honor," said the policeman.

"What does he want?"

"Shure an' he says he's Lee Darwin, but Oi'm on to their little tricks. An' shure by the looks of him I'd say he was one of thim fresh cub reporters that worries the life out of us huntin' for noos."

"Reporter be hanged!" exclaimed a wrathful voice, as a young man strode into the room.

Here the details of the scene before him, the frowning coroner, the amazed jury, the dignified lawyer, sank into his consciousness and he stopped abruptly a few feet from the table.

"What is the meaning of all this?" he inquired, but in a more subdued tone. "Mr. Cunningham, what are all these people doing here?"

Before the lawyer could answer him, he cried out suddenly, "My uncle! What has happened to him!"

"Mr. Darwin was shot last night," answered the coroner.

"Shot? You—you mean murdered?" in a horrified whisper.

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The coroner nodded, then said briskly: "I am glad you are here. There are several questions I should like to ask you."

"I am at your service."

The defiant lift of the head as he spoke, and the fiery look he cast around the room as if challenging us to contradict him, were so like the actions of a creature at bay that I examined him more attentively. He was a tall, broad-shouldered, dark, young man, with a pair of snapping black eyes that roamed restlessly about the room during his entire examination. It was evident that he was laboring under some strong emotion, for much as he controlled his voice and strove to appear calm the muscles of his face betrayed him by their involuntary twitching, and his hands were clenched convulsively at his sides.

"You had a misunderstanding with your uncle yesterday morning. Is my information correct?"

No answer, only a savage look in Orton's direction, as though he divined the source of the coroner's knowledge of his affairs.

"I should like an answer, if you please," with some asperity.

The young man laughed harshly. "I'd call it a quarrel," he said.

"A quarrel, eh? What was the subject of this quarrel?"

A slight pause while he mentally debated the wisdom of replying, then with a sudden abandonment of his former brief manner, he said quickly: "I objected to the way my uncle treated his wife. He took umbrage at what he called my impertinence and told me to clear out. I did. It was none too congenial here."

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"What do you mean by that last statement?"

"My uncle was always at dagger's points with his father-in-law."

"For what reason?"

"I do not know. I fancy, though, that it was something pretty strong that my uncle held over Mr. Trenton. I have heard him say things that had I been Mr. Trenton, instead of listening meekly, I'd have jumped up and knocked him down."

"What was Mr. Trenton's attitude toward your uncle?"

"He was always very pleasant to him, and never seemed to take offense at what my uncle said."

The coroner made a note on one of his many papers and then resumed his questions. "What brought you back this morning if you had left the house for good?"

"I came to get the rest of my belongings. I left rather suddenly yesterday."

"When did you last see your uncle?"

"In this study when I quarreled with him yesterday morning."

"Did you notice whether he was wearing a ring on the little finger of his left hand?"

Was it my fancy, or did he pale?

"My uncle never wore any rings," Lee Darwin answered.

"Yet the physician testified that a ring had been pulled off his finger."

"He wore none when I saw him last." How proudly, and it seemed to me how sadly, that was said.

"Mr. Darwin, did you ever see that handkerchief before?"

As the coroner held up the dainty trifle the young

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man started and with a quick indrawn breath he leaned closer to examine it. Then with a look of relief he straightened to his full height.

"No, I do not recognize it," he said.

"Whose did you think it was when I first held it up?" Again Coroner Graves surprised me by his astuteness.

"Why—why, Ruth's—Mrs. Darwin's," stammered the young man, somewhat taken aback.

"And it isn't hers?" persisted the coroner.

"No, I'm positive it isn't."

Certainly he was a young man after my own heart.

"Would you swear to that fact?" went on the coroner inexorably.

"Look here, do you think I'm lying to you?" demanded Lee Darwin, angrily.

"Would you swear to that fact?" repeated the coroner monotonously, taking no notice of the outbreak.

A dull red suffused the young man's dark face and his eyes smoldered as he glanced at the coroner. "I refuse to answer," he said, sullenly.

The coroner shrugged, having won the battle by creating just the impression that he desired, namely that the handkerchief was Ruth's and that for some reason Lee was trying to protect her. I swore softly below my breath at the blunder young Darwin had committed in becoming angered, for though I knew he could possibly have no motive for shielding Ruth, having heard none of the previous evidence, he had yet managed to strengthen the case against her by his strange attitude.

"Mr. Darwin, did you ever hear of Cora Manning?" suddenly inquired the coroner.

Lee Darwin had himself better in hand this time,

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for his face did not change from its sullen aspect, but he could not help clenching his closed hand tighter until the knuckles showed white through the flesh. That action alone told me that he knew the woman whose name was on Philip Darwin's unfinished will. It also told me that he would deny it. So I was not surprised when he said, a little stiffly, as though he found it hard to speak at all:

"No, I do not know her."

"When you first recognized my official capacity what made you think something had happened to your uncle?"

For a moment he seemed nonplussed, then he answered readily enough, "I suppose it was because I was entering his house and the thought of its master and our last meeting was uppermost in my mind."

"You are sure that it wasn't because you knew beforehand that he was dead?"

I thought he was going to faint, so pale did he become, but he rallied instantly and said, haughtily, "Do you presume to intimate that I killed my uncle?"

"Not at all, since you could not possibly have been in the room at the time," responded the coroner. "I merely wished to learn, whether when you were standing outside the house late last night, you saw what occurred in the study."

This statement created an immense sensation. Everyone looked at everyone else and then at Lee Darwin, who stood before the coroner with blazing eyes and head flung high.

"I came here to get my belongings and not to be questioned about an affair of which I know nothing!" he exclaimed angrily. "I refuse to answer further."

The coroner shrugged. "Of course it is not really

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important. You can tell your story in court when you have been arrested as an accessory after the fact."

"I know nothing about it, I tell you!" cried Darwin in exasperation.

"Your footprints were found in the flower-bed outside the study window. What were you doing there at that time of night?"

Lee Darwin laughed outright, whether with relief or hysteria I don't know, though I incline to the former.

"Your honor, your minions are not as clever as they seem to think. I made those footprints yesterday morning when I left the house through the study window. I turned around and stood there a moment to shake my fist at my uncle," he said, sarcastically.

"Just a moment, Mr. Darwin. Mason," called the coroner.

The old butler came forward timidly. "Did you see Mr. Lee Darwin leave the house yesterday morning?" inquired the coroner.

"No, sir. I knew he was in the study after breakfast but I did not notice whether he came out," he answered, peering anxiously at the young man.'

"That will do. Mr. Orton, please."

The secretary rose and took the butler's place, and as though he had anticipated the question he said eagerly, "Mr. Lee Darwin left the house by the window yesterday morning."

It struck me he was trying to curry favor with young Darwin by the way he spoke and fawned upon him.

"You are positive of this?" said the coroner.

"Yes, Mr. Lee was just leaving the house when his uncle said something to him and he followed him into

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the study. I was waiting for Mr. Darwin in the hall, and after the quarrel, I entered the study at Mr. Darwin's summons in time to see Mr. Lee leave by the window and then turn back again, as he said."

"Now that the word of a gentleman has been vouched for by that of a miserable spy, I trust you will permit me to go to my apartments." The sneer that accompanied the words made Orton wince, but the coroner remained imperturbed. He granted the permission with a wave of the hand.

"Would it be asking too much to allow me to see my uncle's body?" inquired the young man, pausing in the doorway.

"Unfortunately your uncle has been removed to the undertaker's," responded the coroner affably. "If you care to call on them——"

With a gesture of disgust the young man left the room and the coroner was human enough to enjoy his advantage after his own discomfiture at young Darwin's hands.

And now only Ruth remained to be questioned. Would he tell me or Orton to summon her? To my surprise he called Cunningham to him and after a whispered consultation the lawyer left the room and I heard him ascending the stairs.

This unexpected move the coroner explained in a few curt words. "Under the circumstances Mrs. Darwin is entitled to counsel," he said. "Mr. Cunningham has kindly consented to act in that capacity this afternoon."

Had the case against her progressed to the point where she needed legal advice? Then, indeed I had nothing to hope for from the interview which was now about to take place.

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CHAPTER IX

THE VERDICT

A FEW moments later Cunningham returned alone, and presently I heard Ruth's step upon the stair. I arose and as she entered the room I hastened to her and led her to a chair, giving her a reassuring smile as I did so. She looked so little, and so tired, so in need of comfort that it seemed a sacrilege to question her. As for believing her guilty of murder, that was too preposterous!

But then the coroner was not in love with her, and he had his duty to perform. I will give him credit for this, that as he looked into her sweet, gentle face his duty became none too pleasant for him and he conversed with a stranger who had entered the room before he again took up his burden of office. When he did it was to say:

"Mr. Ames, the finger-print expert, has a word to say before we can pass verdict on this case."

Before Ames could speak, Cunningham held up his hand.

"I would like you to hear what Mrs. Darwin has to say first before you attempt to actually incriminate her," he said.

At his words Ruth turned and glanced at him sharply, with a puzzled expression on her face which I could not account for, as she stared at him uncomprehendingly, but as the full meaning of his words

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