Mr. Guelpa

The Famous Detective of THE POINTED TOWER solves a Baffling Mystery

Vance Thompson

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Murder, Mystery, Clever Detective Work

MR. GUELPA

By VANCE THOMPSON

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In this case there is a still hunt for the murderer, which takes in the detective staff of the insurance company, the French sleuth, and a famous psychologist, who joins in the chase through scientific interest.

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A. L. BURT COMPANY
Publishers - New York

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The Famous French Detective Visits America and Finds the Most Baffling Mystery of His Career Awaiting Him

By VANCE THOMPSON

Author of

"The Pointed Tower," "The Scarlet Iris," "The Green Ray," etc.

A. L. BURT COMPANY

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To My Wife

Lillian Spencer Thompson

My Collaborator in Life, Love and Letters

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MR. GUELPA

CHAPTER I

THE NARROW HOUSE

THE man who did not want to die lay in his bed. The room was on the second floor of a Narrow House in West Ninth Street. It was an old house dating from the last century, but it had been furnished up into a new kind of smartness; the brick face of the house was bright with paint, rivaling the wood of windows and doors and the scrolled iron-work; and within was the same air of newness, expressed in the gaudy, gimcrack furniture, the glaring rugs and the colored prints—hunting-scenes and women's heads—the machine-made rubbish of the bargain counters. Even the room where the man lay seemed, with its brass bed and painted chairs, too tawdry a place to die in. Only a flippant kind of death, it would seem, could enter there.

It was after midnight, but the noise from the sleepless New York streets came sullenly through the half-opened window of the bedroom. There was

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only one light—a shaded one on the sidewall. It fell upon the bed, leaving the rest of the room in shadow. And there the man lay, his big head with ruffled hair and unshaved face on a flat pillow, his great arms, half naked, muscular, hairy, stretched out on the bed-cover. He was breathing heavily. His chest heaved up and down. His eyes, reddish like his hair, were wide open and the fear of death was in them; that, and deeper than the fear, amazement. It was as though he had known vaguely that men died, but that *he* should die! He looked down at the strength in his big arms; then his eyes went to the women in the room.

There were two of them.

One crouched in a big chair in a dusky corner of the room. She was dressed in gray, in some kind of house-gown. There was a shawl drawn over her head, perhaps against the night air coming through the window. Under the bend of the shawl her face looked white and shadowy. White hands lay side by side in her lap, motionless. Except for the paleness of face and hands and the light in the eyes she might have been part of the shadow.

Apparently the other woman was the nurse, for she was dressed in a uniform of bluish-gray linen. She was a slow-moving woman, with a strong gentle face. She went to the bedside and moistened the man's face with water. He tried to speak, but no words came—only the gasps of breath. He wanted to speak, but it was evident that now he knew he

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could not. His eyes, distended with the fear that was in them, stared up at the nurse. She stooped and smoothed his forehead, pushing back the wet red hair.

"I have telephoned for Doctor Hamilton," she said, speaking very slowly and distinctly, "and he will be here soon—very soon, now, Mr. Benton."

He must have understood. From where he lay, he could see the door, and now he watched it, with fixed expectancy. Always his lips moved thickly in a vain effort to speak; and he could not. Again the nurse bent over him. After a moment she went softly to the woman in the shadow.

"Mrs. Benton," she whispered.

"Yes?" The apathetic face was lifted for an instant.

"I fear he is dying."

She leaned forward in the chair and stared at the man in the bed.

"He is very weak and I fear he is——"

The nurse turned, startled, for the dying man had gasped out something—a few meaningless words and was making an effort to lift himself up.

The door had been silently opened and in the light from the hall a little Japanese lad stood, faintly smiling. He raised his hand in the air, still smiling, and stepped back to make way for the physician who had been summoned. Doctor Hamilton nearly filled the doorway. He was broad and tall, a big-featured man with a short brown beard. He looked

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for a moment at the woman in the corner and then went swiftly to the bedside; big as he was he was light-footed, restlessly active.

"Nurse, why didn't you call me before this?" he asked abruptly, and without waiting for a reply bent over his patient. When his examination was finished he moved to the foot of the bed and stood there, frowning moodily.

The nurse questioned him with a glance. She read the answer in his grave bearded face.

The man who did not want to die was dying. The fear and even the amazement had gone out of the dying eyes. They were wide open and—empty. The big chest hardly moved as the breath failed. But the hands clenched themselves like the hands of shipwrecked men or those who fall into a gulf; they were clinging to life. Then they too were still.

A little longer Doctor Hamilton stood, looking reflectively at the big body on the bed. Then he signaled to the nurse. Without a word she drew the bed-cover up over the clenched hands and over the face, with its wide open eyes.

"Doctor Hamilton."

"Yes, Mrs. McCune?"

"It is she who needs you now—she is broken—look——"

Mrs. Benton rose; it was as though she had heard their whispered words. The shawl fell back from her head, disclosing the set face, without color, and the pale eyes that stared beyond them toward

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the bed: And when she spoke her voice was also colorless.

"It can not be," she said, "he is not dead——"

Suddenly she wavered and, before Doctor Hamilton could reach her, she reeled back on the chair and lay there a huddled figure that seemed to have fallen in on itself. With rough tenderness the doctor lifted her and made her easy in the chair.

"Steady, Mrs. Benton, steady. There, that is better. You must be strong you know. Quiet."

The very sound of his deep kind voice seemed to revive her. A little of the tensity went out of her face.

"You must remember no one could have done more for him than you have done—think of that, Mrs. Benton—the sleepless nights you have given—your devotion——" This was Nurse McCune speaking to her with quiet insistence, one hand on her shoulder.

"Think, too, of him," the doctor interposed in his quick way, "his suffering is over. He did not suffer long. Remember that. And now it is all over."

"He is asleep," the nurse murmured.

And while they repeated these platitudes of the death-chamber Mrs. Benton neither spoke nor moved, but finally as though the last word were echoing in her brain she said, "Yes, I am very tired. I must sleep."

"Nurse, take her to her bedroom," Doctor Ham-

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ilton spoke abruptly, as was his wont, but his tone was gentle, "and do what you can—I shall see her before I go."

He helped her to her feet and the nurse, one arm supporting her, led her out of the room. When they had gone Doctor Hamilton went back to the bed, and pulled down the white sheet that covered the dead man. He had been there for some time, when Nakki came into the room, a spectacled youth dressed in such clothes as college lads wear. The little Jap glanced from the doctor to the bed and back again.

"Dead?" he asked calmly, the faint habitual smile still on his lips.

"Yes," replied Doctor Hamilton, and he drew up the cover once more, "your master is dead."

"He was a very fine man," Nakki said in precise English, "too bad."

"Wait here, Nakki, I am going to speak to the nurse."

He met Mrs. McCune at the door of the chamber farther down the hall.

"She is resting now," the nurse whispered. "I got some of her clothes off—she is all right. It is the strain and when it was over she just seemed to collapse."

"I shall see her before I go. Where can we talk? Parlor?"

The room called the parlor was down-stairs. It was small, and seemed smaller as the doctor strode

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about it in his huge active way, talking, while Mrs. McCune watched him admiringly but with faint amusement.

"I didn't mean to bully you for not telephoning me earlier," he was saying, "it wouldn't have mattered. Of course I thought I'd pull him through. But you know the type. Athlete, eh? That type. All muscles and no physique—big tree and shallow roots. You'd think the tree would stand for ages. A puff of wind and it's down. Puff! and your strong man is dead. Why? I don't know. We never know. We pretend—and we've got a lot of Greek and Latin words that sound as though they meant something, but they don't——"

"His heart, Doctor——"

"Yes, good, Nurse, good! When a man's heart stops beating he usually dies, doesn't he? You are an informative woman, Mrs. McCune. And heart failure means the heart has failed. Yes."

Doctor Hamilton had been prowling up and down the room, tossing his words over his shoulder. Now he sat down near the nurse.

"What do you know about him?" he asked.

"Nothing—until you called me in."

The sum total of their knowledge was not much. It amounted to this: Mr. Benton had been the doctor's patient once before; that time it had been a cold and nothing more; then he had gone south, for he seemed to be fond of travel; then a month or so ago he had come back to New York, from Cuba, he

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had said, and wondered whether he had a touch of malaria——

"I couldn't find much the matter with him, but you know that type—puff! and the man's dead."

"I never liked him," Mrs. McCune observed, "he was a bully, and his friends were like him."

"Roaring fellows, eh?"

"Two men, they came once or twice, but when he got worse I kept them out."

"You would, Nurse!" Doctor Hamilton said, then he lowered his voice and there was sympathy in it. "And Mrs. Benton? She's a gentle little woman. What do you make of her? She was fond of him?"

"She rarely left him day or night. I had to make her go to bed—when I could. She watched over him, as though he were an ailing child."

"You'd better stay on for a few days till some one comes to look after her. You must notify her family. She's not fit for anything now."

"I know nothing of her family. I must ask her."

"To-morrow?"

"Yes."

"Then there are only the servants?"

"The Japanese boy. He sleeps here. Even when they were on their travels he took charge of the house. And there's a colored woman, the cook. She sleeps out."

"Luella. Yes. I've seen her. I suppose there is money, eh?"

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"Oh, there must be money. They took this house a year ago. When they were married and furnished it—that cost money."

"I suppose it would," the doctor said, with an eye on the gaudy room; "it is the sort of thing money likes."

"I am sure she's been left all right. Anyway, there's his insurance for he told me about it."

"I'm glad of that. She's a strange little woman," Doctor Hamilton went on; all women were little from his view-point, "and gentle. The kind that needs to be taken care of, you know. Seems crushed; damn it, why do men make women like that? Dogs!"

"She is always very quiet and repressed, Doctor. You have noticed it, I see—and very strange at times. I am not sure, for I've never seen it—never seen her taking anything—but I have a suspicion—"

"H'm, you think so?"

"It may be drugs. Not ether. She couldn't hide that—"

"She couldn't hide any of them. Dope can not be hid—and you haven't really seen anything, no?"

"No, Doctor."

"I'll have a look at her now. Come."

Mrs. Benton's bedroom was dark when they entered. The nurse turned on the reading-lamp over the bed and the light fell on the woman who lay there, quiescent, with folded hands and half-closed

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eyes. It was a rosy light, sifted through a rose-colored shade, and it gave an artificial glow, as of youthfulness, to the tragic face.

For the face was tragic. It seemed like a mask of tragedy, not terrible, but tense and sad. A sculptor might have modeled it that way and left it, fixed and unchanging.

When Doctor Hamilton spoke to her Mrs. Benton opened her eyes and looked at him steadily; she even smiled a little in recognition of his kindly words, but the smile made no change in the tragic face; it might have been a smile painted on a marble mask.

The eyes were pale, grayish, dull. There were long lashes to them, and over them eyebrows arched. And there was beauty in the face. The features were regular; they formed a kind of harmony, such as the ancient Greeks imaged in their faces of marble and bronze. In youth it must have been very beautiful; in old age it would affirm its original beauty; but now it was neither young nor old. It was fixed in agelessness—a mask. The hair was pushed back and fixed into a little lace cap; what there was to see of it seemed sand-colored, touched with gray, but that might have been due to the light.

Doctor Hamilton studied the woman. The nurse's suggestion that Mrs. Benton took some drug or other was in his mind. His examination was delicate and patient. No one spoke. For some time he had been holding her wrist; finally he laid

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it down softly on the bed-cover. There was a good smile on his face. When he spoke there was satisfaction in his deep voice. And here in this room, bending over the stricken woman he was no longer boisterous and abrupt. There was extreme gentleness, more than professional, in his manner.

"It is only that you are all in, Mrs. Benton," he said, "you've carried on beyond your strength. I've been noticing it. You've been living on your store of vitality. And now nature has called a halt. You will have to relax and let go. You are a healthy woman. You'll come back all right. But now let go. The strain is over—there's no need for holding up now, let go. I'll give you something to insure a good night's rest and you will sleep."

"Yes, I shall sleep," Mrs. Benton murmured quietly, and she laid her hand on the doctor's arm confidingly. "You are so very good to me. I do thank you. It is just as you said, I only need rest. But please do not make me take anything to put me to sleep. I am afraid of such drugs. Please, Doctor!"

She spoke pleadingly and once more she gave Doctor Hamilton that shallow fugitive smile.

"You are sure you can sleep?"

"Quite sure, Doctor, if I am left alone. But I must be quite alone. In the dark. It is what you said—strain, and now I am sure I can sleep, but if any one is near me—even you, dear Nurse—I shall keep thinking—thinking—"

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"Perhaps you are right, Mrs. Benton. When did you eat last?"

"Nurse gave me some hot milk, when she helped me to bed. See, there is still some left."

"No one shall disturb you. Let go of all your thoughts. Of course you'll sleep. And I shall call in the morning. Good night, Mrs. Benton."

"You are both very good to me. I am not ill, only tired, very tired—"

She turned on her side toward the wall and her head sank deeper into the pillow. Doctor Hamilton paused for a moment, listening to her quiet breathing, then he went out. And when Mrs. McCune had put out the light, she closed the door of the bedroom and joined him in the hall.

"We shall see to everything in the morning, Nurse. All the formalities. I have arranged everything in there," and he indicated the room where the dead man lay. "You need not do anything. 'As for Mrs. Benton, she'll do all right. You were wrong about drugs. It is the strain. She's got to untie herself. I suspect the man was—but never mind. To-morrow you must find out about her family and telegraph—send for them. That's all. 'And you, my good woman, get to your bed. You've had enough on your shoulders. So have I. Well, to-morrow is another day. Good night. The Jap will let me out."

Doctor Hamilton watched the nurse go to her bedroom at the front. It was a little hall bedroom

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facing the street. Then he opened the door of the room where he who had been Mr. Benton lay under a white cloth and was no longer Mr. Benton—was indeed merely a playground for the trooping death-fauna, already busy with their obscure activity.

Nakki was still in the room; he was near the window, the blinds of which were drawn down. He came toward Doctor Hamilton, smiling in his impersonal way.

"You want me to stay with him?" he asked brightly.

"Why?"

"With candles. And a priest. No, Doctor?"

"You can come down and lock up after me and then get to bed."

"Well, I shall do it. He was a fine man. He does not need to be watched. He will not do anything. He is dead. I have seen plenty of dead men. They never do anything," Nakki acquiesced blandly.

Doctor Hamilton looked Nakki over from head to foot as though he were a specimen—from the natty feet to the smiling yellow face with its black eyes glimmering behind the huge black-boned spectacles.

"You are a little queer devil," he remarked. "Now come on with you."

The key was on the inside of the door. When they were in the hall Nakki reached in, took the key and locked the door from the outside.

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"He will not come out," he whispered confidently, "for he is dead. But I lock the door. Why, not?"

He left the key in the lock and followed the doctor down-stairs and let him out.

"Good-by," he said, smiling.

Doctor Hamilton grunted a good night and went swinging down the street.

The little Jap watched him, always with that exasperating and meaningless smile, until he was out of the house. Then he made fast the door. He trotted lightly up the stairs. Opposite the death-room he halted and made a swift gesture in the air; it was as though he were saying: "You stay there, Mr. Benton;" then he went up the narrow staircase to his little room above.

Having told himself to sleep without fear Nakki slept without fear.

And from the basement to the garret the Narrow House was dark and quiet—quiet as only two things are quiet, sleep and death.

As the night wore on even the sleepless New York streets seemed to share in the quietude. For a while at least this one spot in a world of noise was blanketed with stillness.

An hour, another hour; then there was a faint sound in the silent house. It was as though a door were being opened—sweeping over the carpet, perhaps, with a sound as indefinite as a whisper. Again there was silence, followed by almost noise-

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less footsteps and the momentary creaking of the hand-rail on the stairs. There was no light, and through the darkness something, blacker than the darkness itself, moved slowly but without hesitation. It went down the stairs to the first floor and, more swiftly, along the hall and down into the basement. Silence once more; then the area-door grated, as it was drawn open.

Light from the street-lamp came in, outlining a dark form dressed in a woman's coat that fell long and black from neck to foot. It was a mere outline, for a veil hid the face and the gloved hands were not visible: a woman clothed in darkness.

She paused, seemingly listening—she heard no footsteps. Without apparent haste, she closed the basement door and went up the area-steps to the sidewalk.

The sidewalk was empty and the windows that looked down on it were dark. Lifting her veil, the woman glanced furtively to right and left. She was alone—unobserved; but as the glare of the street-lamp fell full upon her it revealed the pale face of Mrs. Benton. In another moment she had disappeared in the night.

And once more the Narrow House was quiet, with the quietude of sleep and death.

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CHAPTER II

IT WAS Nakki who opened the basement door the next morning and admitted Luella to her kitchen. The cook was a wholesome brown woman of thirty, with a plump body and iron-flattened hair. She took off a coat that looked like fur and covered herself with a long white apron.

"Yo had yo' tea?" she asked. "What you lookin' a' me fo'?"

The Japanese boy lingered, smiling. "You have lost something, Luella," he said calmly.

"What? What yo' talkin' about?"

"You have lost your boss."

"How come?"

"Mr. Benton. He is dead."

"Daid? Dat man daid? Whufore?"

"Last night," Nakki said, "he died—all over now."

Luella took a pot from the stove and lifted the lid.

"That's the very soup I was makin' fo' him," she remarked, "an' it's good soup. Some one got to eat it."

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"Do you want to see him?" Nakki inquired.

"Why you ask that fool question? He ain't my people."

The white folk, who consumed her hours of work and payment, were no part of her emotional life—that belonged to the black tenements of rousing love and laughter and quarrel and tribal unity. A dead white man was only a white man dead—and the fear of him belonged to the other race: white ghosts never haunted colored folks. Luella was not afraid, but there was left curiosity.

"Perhaps I go see him," she said, "I never seen a red cawpse."

She put back the soup-pot and lighted the fire.

"I better make some coffee fo' Mrs. Benton. How is she, Nakki? She feelin' pretty bad?"

The cool voice of Nurse McCune stopped any reply Nakki might have given. She answered the question herself from the doorway:

"I have not disturbed her yet, Luella, but I trust she is sleeping. Nakki has told you? You'll do your best, Luella, won't you? We must all do what we can for her—it has been a great shock. Do not bring up her breakfast until I ring, Luella. And hot milk, please."

"Yes'm."

Leaving the servants, the nurse went up to Mrs. Benton's bedroom. For a second she stood at the door, listening. Seemingly she heard nothing, and quietly, lest she might disturb her patient's sleep, she

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opened the door part way. The room was dark. Softly she went to the window and raised the shade, letting in the early daylight. Then she approached the bed.

Mrs. Benton was lying on her side, her face turned to the wall. As though she had sensed rather than heard the nurse's presence, she sat up in bed with a little cry.

"It is all right, it is all right," Mrs. McCune said soothingly. "Did I wake you?"

Mrs. Benton stared at her in a confused way.

"Perhaps," she said. "I do not know."

She drew her hands across her face two or three times. She seemed to be coming up slowly from some great depth of sleep.

"I did not know I could, Nurse, but I must have slept a long time."

"And you are better. I can see."

"Yes," and she lay back on the pillow with half-closed eyes.

She let herself be handled like a child as Mrs. McCune, in the implacable way of a nurse for whom nothing is mysterious, made her morning toilet for her and forced her to eat her breakfast of dry toast and hot milk flavored with coffee. Mrs. Benton was grateful but apathetic. The strain had gone and left behind it, seemingly, mere weariness—indifference—a disinclination for taking hold of the facts of life. The nurse, remembering the promise made to Doctor Hamilton, questioned her about her family and her friends.

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"You must send for them at once, you know."

"But I have no one, no one."

"Every one has some one," Mrs. McCune said bluntly.

"There is no one," persisted Mrs. Benton wearily, "but I want to tell you everything. You are so good."

"Good or not it is my business to take care of you. And things have to be attended to, you know. Surely your parents—"

But Bertha Benton's parents were dead long ago, she explained. She had lived with an old aunt, in a western city—that was in Ohio. And when the aunt died she had come on to New York. To study. There was a dramatic school. She meant to work hard. She had money enough to go on for a while, and she did study and work.

Mrs. Benton spoke without hesitation but without apparent interest in what she was saying. Now and then she glanced sidewise at her companion through half-closed eyes.

And then she had met Dick Benton. No one introduced her. She had just met him. It happened. And she married him a year ago. A year ago. They had been happy. Or had they? Being married was a strange thing, but she was glad to marry him, Dick Benton. They traveled everywhere. But not in Europe. She had always dreamed of that since she was a little girl. Nurse McCune was a long time drawing this story out

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of the apathetic woman, who seemed to be talking of a life that was so definitely past it was no longer a part of her. Practical, common-sense questions brought little more information. Mrs. Benton had no friends she cared about, she insisted, no family or relatives. And Dick had been just like her, alone. He had some friends, one or two, but she had never liked them. He had broken with his family years ago. She did not know anything about them. He had never told her. But perhaps the friends would come. And money? She was afraid Dick had spent his own money and most of hers, too. It was the racing. That was all he cared for and all he did. It was why they went to Cuba, where he fell ill. But the money did not matter. Dick had taken care of her. There was insurance money. Oh, a great deal. That was her wedding present—the only one she received. He had taken out the policy shortly after they were married. He was always thinking of protecting her. People who did not know him well might think he was rough, but she knew that he was always thinking of her and her happiness. Oh, if it hadn't been for the racing and for his friends and the drink they made him take! But no one knew how thoughtful he was for her.

Shadowy facts; the story of a colorless life; the girl from some little city, who had come up to town, ambitious for fame or eager to break the monotony of life, and the noisy roistering man who swept her

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off her feet and made of her—this! And this, Nurse McCune decided was a woman who had been cowed and driven in on herself, and had not yet dared come out and see that she was free, a free unit, a free woman. Probably she had friends, a family; it might be something—her marriage perhaps—that made her hold off from them. Anyway there had been a marriage. It had taken place in New York. Mrs. McCune had seen the certificate, as she had seen the other papers confirming the account of a heavy life-insurance. Richard Benton had carried on his shoulders for a year fifty thousand dollars for his wife's sake; and now, unless she were fool enough to waste it, she was safe from want as long as she lived. But could she take care of her fortune? Mrs. McCune wondered if the young woman could take care of herself—even of the clothes and food and common shelter of life. A feckless woman! For hours she would sit brooding over a book—and a book of verse at that!

"Some one has to see her through," the nurse told Doctor Hamilton later in the day, as they sat talking again in the parlor of the Narrow House. He had visited his patient and found her resting quietly enough, propped up on pillows in her bed. The light hurt her eyes, she said, and the curtains were half closed. She had told the doctor she was better, but tired all over inside and out; so he had ordered her the rest she needed most. And now he was striding about the gaudy parlor, teasing his

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beard and agreeing with Nurse McCune that some one would have to see her through.

"It's probably all rubbish about her having neither family nor friends," he declared, "but I dare say there is a reason. Family quarrel, doubtless. And family quarrels are bitter queer things. Marriage to that kind of a husband would explain a lot of reticence. And so you couldn't get anything out of her?"

What the nurse had been able to learn of Mrs. Benton's life she had already repeated to Doctor Hamilton, and she went over it again.

"I dare say it's all true enough," he remarked, "only she has kept a lot back, poor little woman. The most illogical thing about women is the lengths they'll go in protecting a bad husband. Oh, I don't mean Benton especially. He seemed all right—just plain bully. And waster as you said. Well, Nurse, you know what is to be done. Do it."

Mrs. McCune knew very well what had to be done, when death steps in and takes a man. There was the doctor's certificate of death and that was at hand. She had already telephoned for the funeral director. He was on his way.

"What kind of a funeral, Nurse?"

"Mrs. Benton wants it to be quiet. You see there is no one. There are two of his friends; she has asked me to notify them. And the landlord. She mentioned him."

"Religion?"

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"Oh, I do not think she wants anything of that kind. He was not that sort. If you had heard him talk sometimes as I did—"

"I heard enough from him."

"But of course there will have to be something. A few words from some one, no matter what he thought of such things."

"Dust to dust, you know. Yes, I agree with you, Nurse. Speak to Mrs. Benton again. And to the funeral director."

"He is to be taken to the undertaker's rooms. There's a kind of chapel there. I'll talk to her again. She is just indifferent."

"Where is he to be buried? That will have to be seen to."

"No, he is to be cremated, Doctor."

"What's that?"

"Cremated, Doctor."

Doctor Hamilton was still prowling restlessly about the room; he glanced over his shoulder at the nurse, as he passed her, and asked: "Who decided that?"

"He did. He told me again and again. He seemed to have it on his mind. Even when I first came here and did not believe he was very ill, he spoke of it. He said it was frightful to think of a body being covered up with earth and lying there—for years—"

"Well?"

"I've often had patients talk that way. Of

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course I laughed and told him he would probably outlive us all, but he made it clear enough what he wanted done in case—well, in case anything happened to him was the way he put it."

"And what does Mrs. Benton say to this?"

"She was in the room once when he talked about it—perhaps she heard him say it more than once, for she rarely left the room, after he took to his bed. I spoke to her this morning. She seemed indifferent as usual. She isn't herself yet. But he wanted it, I know. And really," Nurse McCune added in her common-sense way, "it is more sanitary. And more modern."

"It is what she thinks about it," the doctor observed; he had picked up his hat and gloves from a chair and made ready to go.

"She doesn't seem to think about that or anything else. I'll even have to get her some proper clothes. The things she has won't do."

"All right, Nurse, you know what to do. I'll look in later."

Unquestionably Mrs. McCune knew what to do. She was as familiar with the sad routine of death as with the obscure processes of life. And within three days all was over. A little funeral procession of black motor-cars traversed the city and crossed the long bridge. It consisted of a hearse so inconspicuous it might have been carrying anything but what it carried in its dark interior—a few flowers and a large casket of dark wood. Behind it fol-

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lowed, as best they could, four cars. The crêpe-covered figure in the first car was the widow and with her was Nurse McCune. In the second car rode Doctor Hamilton and a bright-eyed little old man who seemed to be comforting himself with the thought that he was following a hearse with some one else in it. He was Mr. Selbin, the owner of the house wherein Richard Benton had died.

"Very prompt he was," Mr. Selbin remarked, as though he were composing an epitaph for his former tenant, "no check, but ready money on the day. A' noble character of a man."

Two men in black coats and gloves, exhibiting unnecessary diamonds and smoking good cigars, occupied the third car. One was a shade fatter than the other. It was he who was saying:

"A good old sport, Jackie, he was a good old sport."

"He was. Not much head but a good sport."

"How long did you know him?"

"About a year or so, you remember—we was up to Saratoga, Jackie."

"Sure, I remember. Queer how quick it takes 'em."

"Him? I often told him. Booze did it. I says to him over to Havana one day, 'It's all right here. The stuff is good. You can lap it up. It makes a king of you,' says I, 'but not in N'York. Cut it out there or it'll get you—it's rottener than poison no matter what you pay for it,' says I."

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"Rot! There's plenty of good stuff if you know!"

"But you don't know. Nobody can ever tell an' if you get a bad lot—there you are, like him, Jackie. That's what he done an' I told him. Says I: 'Dick, cut it out. You're ridin' for a fall.' Well, he fell all right. 'Ask me! It takes 'em all."

"How was he fixed."

"Money? Him? It's hard to tell about them bluffy fellows. He sure was a high talker, Jackie."

"He done his best," said the man called Jackie, "he done his best," as though he, too, were thinking in terms of an epitaph, "an' he never done me out of anything."

"Nor me. He was a good old scout, that Benton person, an' I sure liked him."

In the fourth car Nakki was repeating his familiar ecomium:

"He was a very fine man. Too bad."

And Luella, dressed in black, with a small black hat crowded down on her flattened hair and powder on her solemn brown face, added her comment: "It is certainly a fine cawpse. Fo' a red cawpse it is a sure beautiful cawpse. I'll say that fo' Mistah Benton."

Then the ride ended.

While the mourners stood in deep silence in the little waiting-room, the body was trundled into a cold vault. The steel shutter of the aperture was

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closed upon it. And Richard Benton lay alone, terribly alone, shut off from them all, in his narrow cave of darkness and silence. And then the vault was no longer cold. So fierce a heat woke within it that, minute by minute, what had been the body Richard Benton walked the earth in—the gross body he had filled with meat and drink and taken his arrogant joy in—evaporated like water spilled in the sun. In an hour there was left only a handful of pearl-colored ashes, purified, anonymous, dead.

The mourners went away. Doctor Hamilton rode back in the car with Mrs. Benton, alone. She drooped in a corner. For a moment their car was halted by the traffic. The doctor took her hand and unbuttoned the black glove; the pulse was beating steadily; he counted it, looking at his watch—five, six, seven—

Suddenly the pulse leaped as though the very blood in her veins was wild with panic and fear.

"What is it?" Doctor Hamilton exclaimed.

Mrs. Benton, bent forward now, was staring at an automobile which had ranged up along side of them, but the doctor did not see the two men in it—the glimmer of faces behind glass—before the car shot ahead and was lost in the traffic. He had thought only for the woman. She clutched his arm and clung to him, her face drawn with terror. He tried to calm her with reassuring words: "Steady—there is no danger—tell me what it is—"

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She had been shocked to the depths by those faces, seen in the window, and his voice did not seem to reach her; and before Doctor Hamilton realized it he was holding in his arms an unconscious woman.

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CHAPTER III

THE WIDOW

IT WAS precisely ten o'clock when Bertha Benton, accompanied, or rather shepherded, by Mrs. McCune, entered the building of the Great Orient Insurance Company in Broadway.

The day without was wintry, a cold wind running seaward, and both women were wrapped in furs. The widow was all in black—black cloth, black furs, a black veil. She leaned on the nurse's arm, as she moved forward slowly, with lowered head and eyes that looked neither to right nor left. Mrs. McCune, on the contrary, presented a picture of all that was efficient and practical, with her tailored tweeds and fur-trimmed coat and hat. It was she who led the way and took every initiative until at last they found themselves in the waiting-room of the Claim Department.

"We shall have to wait. Not long, I hope," she said, "it's a Mr. Ringgold we shall have to see."

She glanced at a memorandum slip and then took some papers from her bag and held them ready in her hand.

"Your headache hasn't come back, Mrs. Benton?"

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"No, I am quite well now."

"They keep these offices too hot," Mrs. McCune observed testily, throwing open her coat, "but there's nothing to do but wait. We are early enough and there is no one before us. I trust he is not already engaged. Ringgold—that is the name. He is head of the department."

"It is very good of you to take all this trouble," Mrs. Benton said softly. "I do not know what I should have done, alone."

"I am glad to help you and it is all very simple. Don't worry," and she touched the widow's hand protectively.

Then they sat in silence.

Meanwhile Mr. George Ringgold was sitting in front of his broad office table upon which lay many papers, folded, or in orderly piles. His writing utensils were neatly aligned and the blotting-paper was virginal. He had been dictating letters to the calm girl who was his stenographer and after her departure he paused before taking up his appointment list. It was his habit now and then to steal a few moments from the time owned by the Great Orient Insurance Company to think of himself not without approbation.

He was not an old man; that is, he was about thirty-five or six; and his pleasant reflection was that he had made of his life pretty near what he wanted to make of it. Head of the Claim Department of the Great Orient! That was something;

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and now at thirty-five—young-looking at that! He was a stocky active man, with chestnut-colored hair, where it had not thinned away on top of his head. His short-sighted eyes looked rather peeringly through the thick lenses of his eye-glasses. And he appeared to be just what he was: a reliable and conscientious worker, proud of his job and proud, too, of himself, because he was part of that huge organization. He had no ambition which was not connected with the Great Orient Insurance Company and with his career in it. He had received his business training in a western company, the "New State." It had been slow going, but he might have clung to his job out there on the Pacific Coast and jogged on without future had it not been for The Girl—the girl who said no.

What he got out of this short romance was a new ambition. He had wanted to go somewhere, do things, rise in the world. And this determination, added to the queer luck that always accompanies discarded lovers, carried him on to New York and to the Great Orient Insurance Company—surely peerless in a world of insurance—and on and on to the headship of the Claim Department. And George Ringgold was happy. His passion for the girl had been transformed into passionate devotion for the company. He loved it because his loyal little soul had to love something and he worked for it as a man works for himself, because the company and he were one. They lived together. He had no other

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interests. And each day found him the same loyal man of business, gripping his job and loving it, reaching up above it, and quite happy as he toiled methodically in the shadow of his idol: the Great Orient.

He picked up the appointment list.

Even during the excursion into the background of his life it had never really been out of his mind. And now he was once more the flawless part of the great machine.

He summoned his clerk. "Take them in order," he said referring to the waiting list, and picked up the papers on the top of the pile.

He was scanning them when the two women were shown in and given chairs facing him at the table. He looked up with admirably assumed sympathy. It was not a bore of course, for it was inconceivable that the business of the Great Orient could ever bore him, but it was after all a matter of routine and he knew the type and the story so well; it rarely varied save in details; but of course he would have to hear it. The widow in black and the other woman, as usual. Probably a lawyer in the offing; he wished he were in the room.

"Mrs. Benton? I am glad you were able to come. We had your letter."

Mrs. Benton thanked him; her voice was quiet and low.

"It was I who wrote to you about it," the nurse interposed.

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"And you, excuse me, you are—"

"Janet McCune, trained nurse. Doctor Hamilton engaged me and I was with Mr. Benton until he died. And now I am caring for Mrs. Benton—and she needs me."

"Yes, Mrs. McCune is my friend, too," the widow said, "and she was good enough to come with me. She knows everything."

Mrs. McCune hitched her chair closer to the table, leaving the veiled figure farther in the background. She slapped down the papers she had been holding on the table in front of her, as she began to relate the simple facts concerning the claim on the Great Orient. She spoke tersely, outlining the story of Mrs. Benton's life, her ordinary antecedents, her marriage and widowhood. Mr. Ringgold listened with businesslike courtesy. So often he had heard that sort of thing—a fragment of life at once dolorous and commonplace. His daily food was death and bereavement. But could he have seen, at that moment, into the future, he would have known that Mrs. McCune's statement consisted not of words alone—blunt words that might be spoken or written—but that it was the very fabric out of which drama, romance, even tragedy are spun.

But how should he know?

The future was for him darker even than the veil that shrouded the face of the young widow sitting there in his every-day office. Had he

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known, his trained and careful little soul would have run wild, as it had once when love snatched at him; but no premonition broke the calm of his humdrum thoughts. Quite casually he put the usual questions. With his wonted care he read the policy which Mrs. McCune handed to him. It had been taken out by Richard Benton in favor of his wife, Bertha Benton. It was for fifty thousand dollars. And now, Richard Benton being dead, his wife claimed the money.

"This is your signature?" he inquired.

"Yes," Mrs. Benton replied.

"And you attended the deceased in his last illness, Mrs. McCune?"

"I've already told you that. I was called in by Doctor Hamilton, two weeks before he died. And I was with him until the end."

"Yes, yes, very good," Mr. Ringgold observed reflectively, "quite right."

Once more he carefully inspected the policy and then as though moved by a sudden impulse he went to a cabinet in the corner of his room and returned with a blank form on which was printed: "Signature of Claimant."

"I will ask you to sign this, please," he said, addressing Mrs. Benton.

Laying the slip on the desk he handed her a fountain-pen.

"Will you kindly sit here?"

He spoke pleasantly, with great politeness, but the young woman rose with a start, pushing back

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her chair; and as she stood up the veil which had hidden her face, fell back. And Mr. Ringgold, standing pen in hand, stared at this face, so suddenly revealed.

"Mrs. Benton," he said vaguely.

Recognition seemed to be dawning in his short-sighted eyes.

"But—where have we met before?"

The woman's face was troubled. Her pallor and her black attire gave her a pathetic air of fragility and helplessness, but her wide steady eyes met his without flinching.

Gravely, almost regretfully, she murmured: "You are mistaken. I do not know you."

"But I know you, Mrs. Benton. Where have we met?" Ringgold persisted, "I can not be mistaken. I have to remember things—and faces and names. I have met you. Where? I shall remember in a moment. I always do remember."

Mrs. McCune felt an angry sense of uneasiness. 'All this had nothing to do with the business in hand. What was the silly man driving at? Why was he staring at Mrs. Benton with hard inquisitorial eyes?

She stood up abruptly and went to her patient's side. "Does all this matter?" she demanded abruptly, "suppose you did see her before? When she came with her husband about the policy in the first place?"

Mrs. Benton glanced gratefully at her friend, but Ringgold turned his eyes that way with quite another expression in them.

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"I was on my vacation when the policy was signed," he said shortly, referring to the date, "and anyway she would not have to come to this department."

"Does it make any difference?" the nurse exclaimed sharply.

"No—no—and of course I may be mistaken," and turning once more to Mrs. Benton, he repeated, "Will you please sign this slip?"

She drew off her glove, took the pen and rapidly signed her name: "Bertha Benton."

Mr. Ringgold compared the signature with that on the policy. Then without speaking he took a package of forms from a drawer of his table and sorting out five of them said: "These are the usual blanks, five in number. They must be filled in and signed before a notary public by the undertaker, the physician who attended the deceased, two disinterested friends who knew him in life and saw him after his demise, and finally, Mrs. Benton, by you."

He handed her the papers, and as he did so, he looked keenly at her downcast face. Her eyes were averted. She was very pale, cold, without sign of animation. But the troubled look had passed away. As she took the documents she thanked him in a few words.

"I'll take care of those papers, my dear," Mrs. McCune said, and she put them in her businesslike leather bag, "and now I suppose we can go, Mr. Ringgold?"

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"Yes, that is all for to-day. Return the papers at your convenience," Ringgold replied courteously.

"As soon as possible," the nurse promised, taking her patient's arm. "She is not very strong yet. I must get her home. Well, thank you. I've left a card there on your table with our house address and the telephone number."

Mr. Ringgold opened the door for them with a polite bow. He stood watching them as they traversed the waiting-room and went out into the hall beyond. When the door closed behind them he returned to his office and sitting down at his table inspected the slip on which the young widow had just signed her name. Apparently it told him nothing. For a while he sat there, brooding, tapping the table. But surely he had seen that face. Known it. Where? Here in New York? In other days in Los Angeles? Suddenly he straightened up and got to his feet.

Memory was awake.

And this memory sent the blood from his face and left it sallow. He dropped back into his chair. Elbow on desk, his head leaning on his hand, he drooped there, buried in thought. And bit by bit the recollection came back, a series of facts and events linked one to the other, vivid, authentic.

"If that is so," and he spoke the words half aloud, "I must have a note, a letter, something from her."

Distinctly he remembered that on one occasion

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she had written him to postpone an appointment he had made with her. He had certainly kept her note. It was his habit to keep every scrap of paper that came to him; one never knows. He went to the cabinet and unlocked the drawer containing his private papers, all neatly folded, dated, bound with rubber bands. It did not take him any great time to find what he was seeking. It was a black-bordered envelope. It had not been sent through the post, but the date of its delivery, neatly written by Mr. Ringgold, was on the left hand corner; an old date over five years ago. The envelope in hand, Mr. Ringgold reseated himself. He took out the letter and spread it before him; it read:

"Dear Mr. Ringgold.
"I am sorry I can not keep my appointment today. But I am ill and unable to leave the house. Believe me I am sorry for all the trouble I have given you. I shall call if possible Tuesday at the same hour.

"Yours sincerely,
"Beth Forsythe."

He studied the handwriting. It was a loose and careless script, hurriedly dashed off, it would seem, and in no way resembled the straight, firm handwriting of the signature Mrs. Benton had placed upon the slip. No resemblance. More than disappointment showed in his clouded face. No, they were not the same; they were not even similar; and yet he was sure he was not mistaken—

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some certainty deeper than his knowledge told him he was not mistaken. If he were one to act upon hasty impulse he would lay the case before the comptroller of the company at once. A glow of pride surged up in him as he thought of the sensation he would make were he to do so. And then what a service to the company! His company. Dreams of promotion tugged at him.

But the handwritings—

They should have been alike—some unconcealed resemblance apparent to the trained observer—and they were not alike. Even the capital *B's* in the note and in the signature bore no hint of similarity. Nothing. He puzzled over them with troubled eyes. No; and yet—

And yet the woman was no other than the one to whom his company in Los Angeles had paid ten thousand dollars of insurance money on the death of her husband, five years ago.

And the circumstances of that case were similar, in almost every respect, to those of to-day: a year or so of marriage; a strong man crumbling up suddenly; then death and the young widow, quiet and pallid in her black garments, claiming the money. Not Bertha Benton that time; the name of that widow in the West was Beth Forsythe. In that case, moreover, she had not been accompanied by a trained nurse. Mr. Ringgold remembered well enough the man who had come with her, a big fellow—he would know him.

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Different names. Different handwriting. And the same woman.

He would swear to that.

With sudden resolution he knocked at the door of the comptroller's office.

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CHAPTER IV

GRAPHOMETRY

MR. GEORGE RINGGOLD made no error of judgment, when he laid the facts of the Benton case before the comptroller of the Great Orient. The wheels of the huge implacable machinery of investigation and control began to move. One agent was sent to the little Ohio town, where Bertha Benton claimed she had been born and had lived out her girlhood with her parents and then with an aunt; and another man out in Los Angeles was looking into the Forsythe case. In each of these cases—one on the eastern rim of the continent and the other on the western rim—the same woman, Ringgold was certain, had been the woman to whom the insurance money had been paid. She, in each instance, had been the widow, black-garbed, white of face, with hand outstretched for the death money. George Ringgold would swear to it; he knew; his memory held!

The head of the legal department, Mr. Steeger, took up his end of it. One of his first moves was to talk it over with the advisory counsel of the company, Faynis, Cleave and Faynis.

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He was sitting in a deep leather chair, this morning, in the private office of John Faynis. There was a lighted cigar in his hand. White-haired, verging on fat, Mr. Steeger was a comfortable sort of old man, physically somewhat lazy, but keen-witted and intelligent. A round man and a sound man. Near him sat George Ringgold, keyed-up and important. He felt he was carrying weight.

"No report from Ohio yet?" Faynis asked; he was standing near the window, looking out, now and then, at the stone lanes of lower New York; and beyond, a glimpse of tumbled water and ships. He was an athletic-looking man, still young, rather dark, with a good lean face such as any man might wear with satisfaction; the eyes were remarkable in a way—set far apart and rarely wide open. 'Half-veiled eyes; as though he meant to see all there was to be seen, without permitting any one to read the thoughts he might be thinking.

"Not yet, Faynis," Mr. Steeger answered the question, "if a report comes in I've asked them to send it on to me here, if it arrives before noon. I knew you'd be keen on it."

"And the other end? The Forsythe policy."

"There's a man coming on from Los Angeles. One of the 'New State' lot. What's his name, Mr. Ringgold?"

"Cross. It's Edward Cross."

"Yes. He can identify Mrs. Forsythe. He saw her many times in the office out there. 'And

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the man who was with her. Not that Mr. Ringgold has any doubt about it, but we want to hear what the man Cross has to say. Naturally the 'New State' is as keen on the case as we are."

"It looks like a plain case," Faynis observed, with one of his rare smiles, "and for that very reason, as a wise friend of mine used to say, it probably isn't."

"Simple," returned Steeger, rolling in his chair and reaching for another cigar. "I don't see anything very simple about it. One woman and two dead men and two companies hit hard. That is not a simple game to play. It takes a bit of playing."

"Most games do," Faynis said, "but as that wise friend of mine used to say—"

At that moment his desk-telephone rang. He picked it up.

"Well? Who? No. I can't get the name. Spell it? What! Show him in—certainly."

Faynis hung up the receiver.

"Steeger," he said, "that's odd. He's the man I've been talking about—the wise man. I knew he was coming over, but I didn't know he had arrived. You'll want to see him."

"Who is it?"

But already the door had opened.

An office boy effaced himself. Standing in the doorway was a neat little man, holding carefully in his left hand a round black hat. He came forward, bowing, smiling.

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"Mr. Guelpa!" Faynis exclaimed, and got him by the hand.

"How do you do, Mr. Faynis. I am disturbing you?"

"No, no. I am delighted to see you. I've just been talking about you. This is Mr. Steeger. Mr. Ringgold—Mr. Guelpa, of Paris."

"How do you do," Mr. Guelpa beamed on one man and then on the other, but he did not shake hands. Instead he bowed.

"Take this chair, Mr. Guelpa. I am mighty glad to see you. And give me your hat," Faynis went on.

"No, I'll keep it," Mr. Guelpa replied. Then he sat down, and after inspecting his hat—a perfectly new hat—he laid it carefully on his knee.

"Your name is introduction enough, Mr. Guelpa," and Faynis turned toward the fat man in the chair, "eh, Steeger?"

"I've got his books," Steeger remarked, "in fact, Mr. Guelpa, I not only have them, I have read them. That theory of yours that human evidence is almost always false—always warped—never wholly convincing—there's something in it."

"You think so?" Mr. Guelpa remarked blandly; he turned to Faynis.

"I wrote you a letter," he said.

"Yes, and I would have met you if I had known your boat. My wife will be glad to see you. And Mrs. Guelpa and your daughter?"

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"They are here. At the hotel."

"Mrs. Faynis will call on them, of course."

Steeger had not felt that he was snubbed off. Well enough he knew who this little man was, and the part he had played in the world-wide battle against the forces of crime. Pretty nearly all that is known, to-day, of the scientific investigation of crime had been in Mr. Guelpa's brain, he knew, before it got into practise and into books. Those volumes on technical research, on identification of criminals, on poroscopy, on traces and imprints and laboratory analysis were in every library of criminology.

For thirty years Mr. Guelpa had been at the head of the Technical Police Laboratory of Lyons and precisely there and then the modern science of criminology had been born.

And Mr. Guelpa was the midwife of that gigantic birth.

World over he had been called in to establish similar institutions for the detection of crime—from that of San Paolo in Brazil to that of Rabat in Morocco; world-over, too, his methodology of crime was being accepted, in reluctant New York and London, even as in Buenos Aires. Steeger knew it. Mr. Guelpa's new science stood up big as a tower. One couldn't get away from that. And not only could he talk and write about crime detection; the little man could do what he talked about: the acid test.

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Steeger remembered how Mr. Guelpa had untangled the mysterious de Granlieu case, over in Paris, when Eva Ryle the "American countess" had stood in peril of her life. And the Cole case in the 'Argentine and many others.

"Mr. Guelpa," Steeger said, "there will be a good many people over here anxious to see you. That is the penalty of fame."

"And perhaps some who won't be so keen on seeing him," Faynis remarked.

"No, no, Mr. Faynis. I have come to see the men who will want to see me. Beyond doubt. Your great men. Ah, what men you have! I know what they write. Now I shall meet them. It is all arranged. Three men."

"Who are they, Mr. Guelpa?"

"Osborn. His book on *Documents* is a landmark, eh? and Ledsky, who wrote *Manuel*. And—ah, that other? A difficult name. Persifer Frazer, who makes the composite photographs of handwriting. They are your great men. And when I have talked with them I shall go home directly—and finish my own book."

Talkative and affable, Mr. Guelpa nursed his little hat on his knee, and smiled politely. Mr. Ringgold from his seat, a trifle distant, peered at him curiously. He didn't think much of foreigners and the little man was not very impressive anyway. He was surprised at Mr. Steeger's next remark and his face darkened with disapproval. What Mr.

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Steeger said was: "We've just been talking over a case that I think would interest you. Eh, Faynis?"

"Thank you, Steeger. You've broken the ice. I was about to ask Mr. Guelpa what he thought of it."

The little man's refusal was prompt.

"No, no, I can do nothing. I am here for one purpose—and three men. I can not stay long. When I have studied their methods, their experiments, I shall go."

"Anyway, Faynis, I am sure Mr. Guelpa would like to hear the facts," Steeger insisted.

"Facts? Ah, I am always glad to listen. And then what can I refuse my friend, Mr. Faynis?"

"That is very kind of you, Mr. Guelpa. And you know what your opinion means to me."

Faynis was at his desk. He sifted his papers for a moment and then in cold clear sentences began to state his case. At first, as the lawyer commenced to relate the story of the conspiracy, as he saw it, against the Great Orient and that other company out West, Mr. Guelpa manifested no special interest. He merely sat there, staring at his hat, his hands quite still, his face expressionless. Ringgold from his chair watched him with disapproval. This little man was shockingly foreign. From his smart, buttoned-up black coat billowed a bright-colored neck-tie, decorated with a big agate pin. That was annoying. And then there was that neat mustache, so patently dyed an impossible kind of purple black,

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while the wisps of hair on the bony head were grayish-white. The eyebrows, which should have been white also, were the color of the mustache. It was all wrong; it was foreign. The old face, with its network of multiple wrinkles, had no meaning. And yet Ringgold waited impatiently for his own name to be brought into the story.

The woman's name was pronounced first.

"You see this Bertha Benton is the crux of the case," Faynis was saying.

"Ah, the woman!"

Mr. Guelpa laid his hat carefully on the table, then he straightened up in his chair. An alert look shot across the wrinkled face and made it young, and the leaden eyes behind the pince-nez brightened into steel.

"The same woman?"

"Undoubtedly. Although she denies it."

"Have I all the facts?" Mr. Guelpa asked briskly, "like this: Five years ago a man dies in Los Angeles. Yes? His widow is paid the life-insurance money which was her due. It is so? Now another man dies in New York and his widow claims from your company a very large sum of money. You are suspicious. It appears from your records that the New York widow has an entirely different life-story from that of the one who received the money from the other company. She was married in New York, but not as a widow. No? It was, she stated, her first marriage. But if she did

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not tell the truth, eh? If she was that other woman? Ah, then you say it looks very bad. Well?"

Mr. Guelpa had spoken rapidly. His English, like that of most foreigners who speak the language well, was just a trifle more formal than that of the every-day citizen, but he had the Gallic way of putting his remarks in the form of questions. It was Steeger who answered him.

"That sort of thing has been done," he remarked, "we are always on the look-out."

"As to Mrs. Benton," Faynis said, "we already have a good deal to go on. Mr. Ringgold, here, is fairly certain she is the same woman who appeared as claimant in the Forsythe case in Los Angeles. He was with the other company then and he has an excellent memory."

Mr. Guelpa turned toward the efficient head of the Claim Department of the Great Orient, with a friendly smile.

"Ah, Mr. Ringgold. A witness. To identification. Yes. He has seen a woman. He has fixed an image of her in his memory. Now he has seen a woman once more. He compares the images. They are identical. Two wonderful faculties—to be able to see and to remember. What did you see, Mr. Ringgold, and what do you remember?"

Mr. Guelpa beamed as though the one thing on earth he really loved was a witness and as though in Mr. Ringgold he had at last discovered his perfect specimen.

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"I recognized her," the witness answered anxiously, for he feared the little man's smile. "The company I was with in Los Angeles paid her ten thousand dollars. It was a pure coincidence that I should have been here with the Great Orient, five years later, when she appeared under another name with this new claim for fifty thousand. I knew I had met her, although she denied it. At first I was not just sure when I had known her; but after she had left I remembered."

"Memory came back. The image. Yes, continue, please."

"I remembered. She was the woman I knew first as Mrs. Forsythe," Ringgold went on with a hint of defiance. "She had made an impression on me out there—she was very young and seemed to take the death of her husband very hard. There is such a thing as sympathy, Mr. Guelpa, even in business."

"Yes, that would help. So you are quite certain?"

"Yes, and I remember the man who accompanied her. He was big and arrogant, so I remember him well enough."

"You would know him?"

"Anywhere."

"Continue, please."

"After Mrs. Benton had left my office I got to thinking. There was the resemblance and then it flashed upon me."

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"Yes."

"I had received a letter from the Forsythe woman in Los Angeles."

"Yes," interposed Faynis, "you might tell us about that once more, Mr. Ringgold."

"A letter? There would be letters, of course. Pray tell me," Mr. Guelpa said softly, but there was cold scrutiny in his gray eyes as he bent them toward the man of memory.

"Once I was sure of the woman, it occurred to me I might have a note from her among my personal papers. I seemed to have it in mind that she had written to me about an appointment. When I found it, I—"

"Pardon, Mr. Ringgold," interrupted Faynis, "here is the letter."

He opened the folded paper and handed it to Mr. Guelpa.

"Thank you." But Mr. Guelpa did not look at the letter; as though unconsciously his active fingers refolded it into envelope shape and always he scrutinized the important face of this one man who had seen and remembered and was, so far, the only witness in the case.

"And of course you compared the handwriting with the writing of Mrs. Benton. Yes?"

"I had only her signature to go on."

"Quite enough. Shall I tell you what you found? *You found the handwritings were totally different.*"

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It was one of the dramatic incidents Mr. Guelpa enjoyed; he laughed softly to himself, as he noted Steeger's surprise and the smiling acquiescence of John Faynis.

"Of course they are not the same. It can not be possible you thought they would be, Mr. Ringgold?"

"I hoped they would be, sir."

"It would have meant our case," Steeger put in bluntly, "or a good bit of it."

"I do not agree with you, Mr. Steeger, but let me see the signature of Mrs. Benton," the little man said abruptly.

He opened the note signed Beth Forsythe, read it slowly, held it up against the light and then laid it face up on the desk. He spent more time inspecting the signature of Bertha Benton. Then he laid the two papers side by side. He was standing now at the table, bent over, looking first at one and then at the other. At last he picked up an ebony ruler. He laid it flat on the letter, moving it at varying angles, and repeated the process with the slip of paper on which the Benton signature was written. The three men were all standing near him, watching every move.

"You are right, quite right," Mr. Guelpa said, straightening up, and beaming on Mr. Ringgold with affable eyes, "they are utterly dissimilar. And you know that is curious, isn't it? For—"

Mr. Guelpa continued, still smiling—"*they were written by the identical, the same hand!*"

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CHAPTER V.

"EVIDENCE POURS IN"

MR. GUELPA had installed himself in an old-fashioned hotel in Fifth Avenue near Washington Square. Gloom had long ago settled upon it, though in the days when New York tippled openly, it had been as reelingly gay as any nook in the old town. It still maintained its fame as the place where one could really dine. And it was French. The book-stall in the lobby was yellow with paper-covered volumes. The servants were French. It offered Mrs. Guelpa a little bit of home. She had been baffled, anywhere else, by the almost universal conspiracy of New Yorkers not to speak her native tongue. In the old dark rooms she found the kind of comfort she was used to, and, out-of-doors, her daughter Julie's English was good enough to make shopping possible. Then there was Mrs. Faynis, a friend of Parisian days. And there were concerts. And this afternoon it was to be the Philharmonic, for Mrs. Guelpa was a musician.

She turned from the tall mirror in their sitting-room, with a last admiring glance at the image she saw there. She was a tall, dark, commanding wo-

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man, gloomily handsome; and she radiated personality—a rich and troubled kind of personality which might have befitted a prima donna rather than the wife of Mr. Guelpa. One wondered how she had ever become the mother of the round blonde girl, suave and placid as cream, who stood at the window looking down into the avenue, where processional automobiles and motor-buses passed. Julie had the beauty of her eighteen years.

"There's the car," she said; it was the familiar Faynis car, which had called for them.

"Tell your father."

"Yes, mother."

She tapped at the door of an adjoining room.

"Fa-ather," she announced, "mother is waiting."

"Waiting, my dear, that's too bad," Mr. Guelpa exclaimed, bustling in, "I am sorry."

"Are you not coming with us, Jules-Marie?" his wife said, in her somber way. "Although I could not expect that of you."

"But you know of my appointment? Professor Ledsky is coming. I showed you the charming letter from that great man—I am sorry," Mr. Guelpa apologized, "and anyway Mrs. Faynis is to meet you at the concert."

"I had thought, Jules-Marie, this was to be a holiday and that, like other women, I might have a husband, for this once."

"The holiday, my dear, is for you and Julie. You forget my book. And then, Hortense, just at present I am interested in a—woman."

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"Fa-ather!" Julie exclaimed, and she and her stepfather waited, in complicity, for a temperamental comment from Mrs. Guelpa. That ample lady disappointed them. She merely glanced at the natty little man with the dyed mustache and twinkling eyes, shrugged her shoulders and went to the door. Mr. Guelpa opened it, and as they passed he told his step-daughter she was almost as beautiful as her mother; and indeed Julie in her short fur coat, which was round and blonde, and in her blonde round hat deserved the compliment; she was like a yellow rose.

He accompanied them to the car. He had no sooner returned to his apartment than a card was brought to him. It was presented by a page, for Mr. Guelpa had discouraged the American habit of shouting names up through the telephone.

"Please bring Professor Ledsky here," he said.

Professor Hugo Ledsky was a distinguished-looking man. His fame in the world seemed to bolster him up physically. Though he had never seen him in the body, Mr. Guelpa would have recognized him anywhere. He had seen in various books and scientific publications so many photographs of the great man—pictures taken in his laboratory, on the lecture platform, and in groups of fellow-scientists. Mr. Guelpa, who had a brain of his own, kept his highest reverence for brain in others, and he welcomed Professor Ledsky with grave enthusiasm.

So this was the author of that epoch-making book, *Experimental Heredity!* For Mr. Guelpa it

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had opened a new world of knowledge. And this was the authority, who had first defined the "Psychic Parasites" in that startling lecture that had shaken the scientific world; he whose studies of the "transformations of living beings," had created a new frontier for experimental psychology; this lean urgent man, with black eyes gleaming under shaggy brows, was Ledsky.

Mr. Guelpa had educated his perceptive faculties—all of them. And he trusted them. His sensitiveness to impressions was very keen. What first came to him, when he encountered a stranger, was a general impression, as though he had sensed that composite vibration which makes up the man and is as individual as the lines in the hand or the pores of a finger-tip. And even before his eyes, behind their glasses, had given their report of the stranger, his sensitive ears had recorded their impression of the man's walk, the rhythm of his steps, and, if he spoke, the revealing timbre of his voice—the things that can not normally lie.

So Mr. Guelpa, as was his wont, flashed a look at the tall man in front of him, clearly outlined in the doorway. It was a look of welcome and admiration, but it took in the entire man, and stamped on his unfailing memory a picture ineffaceable and exact.

Their hands met, with mutual respect; brain acknowledged brain; celebrity greeted celebrity; science confronted science.

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"It was really for this I came to your country," Mr. Guelpa began, "to know the gentleman who wrote your books."

"You are very kind," Professor Ledsky returned; he had recovered his right hand from Mr. Guelpa's clasp and was rubbing it gently with the other, "it is a great pleasure to meet you. You need not have sent me that letter of introduction from Lacassagne. Your name had sufficed."

Mr. Guelpa was not a bitter foe to flattery. He warmed to the great scientist.

"It is strange about that letter," he remarked. "Poor Lacassagne died shortly after he sent it to me. He admired your work."

"Lacassagne was a great man in his day. He created the science of criminal anthropology, which you," and Professor Ledsky bowed, "are perfecting."

"Helping it on a little, perhaps," was Mr. Guelpa's modest answer.

He liked that tense vibrating voice; it rang true—as steel rings on steel. And the man himself might have been framed on steel springs, fine-tempered, restlessly alive. His body was slim and straight, very tall. The hand Mr. Guelpa had held for an instant in his own, was long and cool, smooth of skin, with not much grip in it. What was most striking was the head, high-domed, covered with thick, brown disorderly hair. The narrow sallow face was cleanly shaved. In comparison with that

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huge forehead it seemed too small, with its thin nose and pointed chin; but it was a mobile face, fine-drawn and keen.

They were seated now, and Professor Ledsky leaned forward out of the old-fashioned chair, his restless hands always playing with each other.

"There are many things I must ask you, Mr. Guelpa, about your work, about the new men in your branch of science—I have been corresponding with Oloriz of Madrid, and Bayle. He is still in Paris, Bayle?"

He talked rapidly, but when he asked a question he always paused, waiting politely for a reply.

"Your laboratory work," he explained, "touches ours—that is why I am interested in your experiments. All sciences are one."

"Anyway they touch elbows."

"They flow into each other—criminology, biology, psychology, all the sciences, physical or mental, flow into each other." Mr. Guelpa assented although the theory did not seem worth getting excited about; but then, he reflected, Professor Ledsky was that sort of a man. Thought excited him. Especially his own thoughts.

"Yes, all one. It doesn't matter where you start you have to make the circuit of all human knowledge," the professor spoke urgently, as though he were trying to convince an audience, or perhaps merely impress the quiet little man in front of him. "We begin with a drop of mammalian blood and for

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you it is the point of departure for a crime. For me it is the man himself—the whole man; his processes, his diseases, his ancestors are all in that drop of blood. An ancestor, sending down the heredity of madness or lust. A parasite of disease. So you have the crime and I have the man. We went by different paths to meet again. And so the sciences are coming together and, soon, they will be one. Then—a terrible thing will happen—"

Professor Ledsky's eyes burned in the hollows under his shaggy brows and his hands clenched; after a pause he added:

"Man will know nature, yes, but the terrible thing is he will know man! Science will lay him open, hunting out his subconscious thoughts, running down his dreams—all lying open! Why not? We shall know everything. The secrets of nature and the secrets of man. And then—"

"And then," quietly interposed Mr. Guelpa, "life will be very dull, will it not? If there is nothing more to find out we shall lose our jobs."

Professor Ledsky got off his high-horse. He laughed and ruffled his thick hair.

"My hobby," he explained, "but I don't often talk about it."

"I am glad you did. It is a mark of confidence," Mr. Guelpa replied; he could understand that there were few to whom the great scientist could let himself go like that; and, after all, science makes cronies of men. Talk was easy now. Hav-

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ing blown off his nervous enthusiasm Professor Ledsky showed his courteous interest not only in Mr. Guelpa but in his achievements. How long would he remain in New York? Whom had he already met? They must see more of each other. In a social way, too, he hoped. Their wives must meet. Why not a visit? Professor Ledsky had opened his country house up the Hudson for the winter holidays. Yes, the Guelpas must visit him. If the ghost of old Lacassagne who had brought them together were still prowling, ha! that would please him. A visit then—a long week-end. A world of snow up there. An old stone house on a hill and a wood fire roaring up the chimney. Yes, and he had a wonderful laboratory out there and they could experiment as well as talk.

"I need a change," Professor Ledsky said, "a rest from lectures, consultations, patients. You will come? That is promised. Though of course I shall have to consult my wife before setting the exact time."

Mr. Guelpa accepted Professor Ledsky's cordial invitation with becoming thanks. "You are really very kind," he said.

"My car will run you up."

"I am sure my wife and my step-daughter—"

"We shall make them happy," interrupted Professor Ledsky. "And now your own new book, Mr. Guelpa?"

"My little study on graphometry? Ah, it was

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you 'Americans who opened the way. Persifer Frazer, Osborn, eh? But perhaps I shall add something," Mr. Guelpa remarked modestly—not that he disesteemed his work, but it was not his hour for crowing, "perhaps I can add a little to what they have done. You are interested? Oh, not in the detail, I know, but the subject would fit into your theory of the unity of the sciences. Matter is fluidic, changing, shifting, dancing about from one state to another. But the man! He remains himself. Three months before his birth he has on hands and feet the lines he will die with, unchanged. And his gestures never alter. The first step a child takes prefigures the walk of the man. 'And writing?"

The little man chuckled with self-approval.

"Writing is a gesture. And this gesture is conditioned in its extent, its direction, its force, by factors that remain from birth to death. Eh? Physical and anatomic factors. You know all that. Bone, muscle-leverage, nerve-transmission, always the same for that boy who grows to be a man. And what I prove is that the gesture of writing, for any given person, does not change; it is constant, always to be distinguished from a similar gesture made by any one else. Forgery, false writing—they can not be hid. This bit of science will help to lay the man open, eh, as you said?"

"That is very interesting," Professor Ledsky remarked thoughtfully, "it will take you far."

"You see? 'And I have many examples. 'A

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great deal of data. And already since my arrival comes a new case. Two writings, apparently as unlike each other as the baby's first step and the man's walk. But the two gestures were made by the same hand."

Professor Ledsky showed polite interest.

"I should like to see that," he remarked.

"I shall have photographs. I will show you the grammatic parallels that prove it. And it is an extremely interesting case. You know Mr. Faynis, the lawyer?"

"By repute."

"He put it before me. It is a big insurance swindle—I do not care about that part of it. But the handwriting, ah! that does interest me. And I want to see the woman."

"Then it is a woman who has swindled them?" Professor Ledsky was always politely attentive.

"It is her handwriting I have to go on, but, of course, I know nothing about the swindle. She is what attracts me—that gesture of hers. So different and yet the same. It was that gesture that got the money from an insurance in Los Angeles five years ago. Now with the same gesture she claims fifty thousand from the Great Orient. *She did not know the gesture was the same! But I know.*"

"Remarkable!"

"Yes, and I must see that woman. The case is just beginning, but Mr. Faynis has arranged for me to meet her. She is young, they say. A lady. Not

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at all the accepted criminal type—but you and I know what rubbish that type theory is! Of course her appearance—her personality—means something. But it is her psychology—"

"Yes!" his visitor exclaimed abruptly, "that is what you would want. The psychology of the woman. And the handwriting—the gesture. Remarkable! This will help your book."

"It may be a very famous case," Mr. Guelpa suggested.

"Quite true! The better for your book." With this, Professor Ledsky got up suddenly; it was as though his steel-spring nerves had jerked him out of the chair.

"I am delighted! This has been a visit I shall not forget. Perhaps I have made a new friend? Yes. You will present my compliments to your family? A great pleasure."

Once more science shook hands with science, and Professor Ledsky, swift and urgent, went his way. Mr. Guelpa remained standing near the door, a whimsical expression, half admiration, half wonderment, on his face. His unspoken comment was: "A great man, that; but he is over-worked; he has too much brain to be quiet with." After a pause he added: "And he ought to get his hair cut. He is carrying too much weight."

He had no more than rolled a cigarette and lighted it, when John Faynis came in.

"I'm on my way up-town," Faynis said, after

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the howdy-dos were disposed of, "and I dropped off to bring you a bit of news."

"Now what would that be? Sit down and smoke. Perhaps you have heard from the man who went out to the town where Mrs. Benton was born."

"You've guessed it, Mr. Guelpa."

"Was it a guess? I never guess. And you have learned that the story she told of her life was not quite true, eh?"

"True? It is a tissue of lies from start to finish. Not a word of truth. Birth and parents and the dear old aunt and the little fortune—all a lie."

"Tiens, tiens!" Mr. Guelpa exclaimed, indulging in his favorite expression which means nothing and means, at times so much, "all false? But no human story—nothing a human being relates—is ever wholly false, or wholly true. Behind every lie the truth always lurks in waiting. A life is like a coin—the truth is on the other side, the unseen side of it. A false statement like the one you have discovered is—it can not help being—an index of what she wanted to hide.

"Eh? but that can wait, Mr. Faynis, but Mrs. Benton—"

"Why did she take such a risk? Any fool would have known we could run that lie to earth."

"But would you have done so, if you had not had a good reason for suspicion? No, it would have passed well enough. And Mr. Benton? You know all about him?"

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"His references seemed all right. So was the physician's report—a very healthy young man. Good for a long life, bar accident."

"Accidents will happen," Mr. Guelpa interposed, "especially in a business like that of the Great Orient. And when may I see Mrs. Benton?"

"Whenever you think best. She is at her home. Indeed we are having the house watched. Steeger advised it."

"Merely a precaution? Surely she can not suspect that you think there is anything wrong? That you have begun this investigation?"

"No, that's impossible. We have kept everything very quiet. She is merely waiting until her claim has passed through the ordinary routine. We are going to have Mr. Ringgold call on her, ostensibly about the policy, and all that, there are a few things we require to know. You might go with him. Your opinion of that woman—"

"Ah, the woman! Why will women do such things?" Mr. Guelpa asked drearily. "But they do. And she will find it does not pay. In fact Mr. Faynis murder rarely does pay."

"Murder!" Faynis cried.

"*Tiens!* You seem surprised! What did you think it was? She had to have a corpse. Of course Benton had to be the corpse. That is why he was murdered. Logical, is it not? Poison, I presume. Mr. Faynis, your people had better have that dead body exhumed."

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Faynis had been staring at the little man who sat there smiling, nodding, talking of this horror in a quiet easy voice, colorless as ether. At last he slapped his hand down on his knee.

"That body was burned," he exclaimed.

"Ah, the dead man was cremated! And there is no way of making him speak," Mr. Guelpa's face was lit with satisfaction. "Burned and the ashes, of course, scattered to the wind or water. Splendid! The evidence is literally pouring in—pouring in—"

"Evidence! But we've lost the one thing that could have proved that murder was done," Faynis interjected.

"No, no," and Mr. Guelpa repeated the words as though he loved them, "it is just beginning to pour in—pour in—"

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CHAPTER VI

"AND at first you were not quite sure, Mr. Ringgold?"

"Not sure at all. It was an impression. And then gradually I remembered, Mr. Guelpa, and had no doubt at all. Certainly I had seen her before."

They were walking side by side toward the street of the Narrow House in affable talk. Mr. Guelpa, exercising the charm that was his when he wanted to use it, had won Mr. Ringgold's confidence and a little of his admiration. There was a thin streak of romance in the methodic man of business and it vibrated to Mr. Guelpa's expert massage.

"And was this Mrs. Benton dressed like the woman you saw in Los Angeles? Did that help?"

"Well, of course she was in black, but it was the veil drawn over the face—when she raised it—yes, that brought it back. And she was pale."

"Both of them? But that means nothing because it may mean anything. It may mean fear, or guilt, or weariness—anything. She was dressed quite in the mode?"

"Mrs. Benton? Well when she came to the

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Great Orient she was dressed like any one else in similar circumstances. I particularly remember the veil, and her fur pulled up round her throat and the close black dress."

"Did she sit down?"

"Of course, Mr. Guelpa."

"And she sat erect? Both feet on the floor?"

Mr. Ringgold emitted a short whinny of laughter.

"I was looking at her face," he replied.

"And that was calm?"

"Calm and steady and—pale."

"I will tell you something, Mr. Ringgold. An anecdote. Once I was studying a lady. It was in Paris. She was, I was sure, a murder-lady, but there was only suspicion to go on. And, as the way is with us, she had been confronted with the corpse. At first she showed the natural emotion of a woman brought suddenly in front of a dead body—quite horrible, just as it had fallen. Then she sat there, calm, mistress of herself. Her denials were natural; they had all the steadiness of innocence. So I did not study her face. I looked at her foot. She had crossed one leg over the other and at each beat of the heart, the foot she had raised moved. Not regularly. And merely by watching the foot I could read the wild variations of her pulse, as though I had had my finger on her wrist. Those little movements of the foot, showed that her pulse was throbbing and jerking with terror, horror, fierce emo-

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tion. Her face? It was placid, self-controlled; it told nothing. Ah, Mr. Ringgold, when you would study a woman do not try to read her face or her eyes. No man can read them aright. Make her cross her legs and you can read her secret in the rise and fall of her balanced foot. It is the one part of her body she can not train to lie for her."

Mr. Ringgold had a momentary vision of a room full of women, sitting with crossed legs; and while their faces shone with innocent gaiety their pulsating feet confessed monstrous crimes; it was most disturbing. He eyed the little man askance. Mr. Guelpa smiled; he was probing George Ringgold for that thin streak of imagination which somewhere in his orderly humdrum nature, he knew, lay hid; it was a meditative smile.

"And the house of Mrs. Benton?"

"This is it," Mr. Ringgold said.

They were in front of the Narrow House—the house of death and mystery—and the iron-railed steps leading up to the door. For a while no one answered their ring, and they rang the bell again. Then the door opened and Nakki's bland face appeared.

"Well?" he asked, conjuring up a look of interest.

"To see Mrs. Benton," Ringgold said, his voice all business and a business card in his hand.

Nakki shook his head to and fro.

"No," he murmured sympathetically, "it is too bad. Mrs. Benton is not at home."

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"She will see me," persisted Mr. Ringgold; "that order was not for me."

"Well, I have made an explanation," Nakki continued pleasantly; "Mrs. Benton has gone away. Good-by."

He started to close the door, but Mr. Guelpa was leaning against it and it did not move.

"One moment? When will she return?" Mr. Guelpa asked; and Nakki opened wider the door to look at him.

He saw a mysterious little man in a fur coat and a round hat, saw, too, above the brilliant necktie, a grim face and the coldest eyes he had ever confronted. His mood dropped to defensive sulkiness.

"I do not know," he declared. "Everybody gone. Mr. Benton, well, he is dead. Mrs. Benton she has gone away."

"When will she return?" Ringgold inquired.

"I do not know." It was all he had to say; the night before he had called a taxi and she had driven away; and Nakki tried to close the door.

"Careful, boy!" Mr. Guelpa snapped out.

He understood the Oriental mind and he knew the Oriental mind dipped its flag, always, to authority; but only when that authority was mysterious, alien, unfamiliar.

"The insurance," he whispered, lowering his voice; "come on, Mr. Ringgold. We shall see the house. Here, boy, take that card from Mr. Ringgold and keep it carefully."

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Nakki took it as though it were a talisman; he was still studying it when they brushed past him.

"Is this the reception-room?"

It was the parlor and Mr. Guelpa glanced round it curiously. It was a room at once rich and tawdry, and over the gaudy furniture lay a film of dust. Mr. Guelpa stood in the doorway. His inspection was slow and unhurried. The shade was half drawn and near the window was an easy chair, a book lying upon it.

"My book," Nakki volunteered the remark, "I am a student. Also housekeeper."

"Go back to your book, then," Mr. Guelpa said; "if we need you we shall let you know."

Nakki went without hesitation. His yellow face showed neither curiosity nor concern. He picked up the book and sat down, blandly indifferent to the doings of that mysterious white authority.

Mr. Guelpa walked the length of the hall and glanced down the stairs leading to the basement, before he returned to Mr. Ringgold, who was waiting near the door.

"We shall go up-stairs first," he said, "to the sleeping-rooms."

The front bedroom was where the man had died. It was in order, save for the bed, stripped naked of linen. Along one wall was a divan where a watcher might have lain to be within call of the patient. There were chairs, a night-table, a chiffonier, a large rug—nothing else.

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The room had been cleansed, disinfected, deodorized—the ghost of the dead and the imprints of the living had been blown out of it.

Mr. Guelpa went to the window and drew aside the silk curtain. The street was peopled with passers-by.

"You know that your company is having this house watched?" he inquired of Mr. Ringgold.

"Yes, I know."

"But do you happen to know the men who have been put on to watch the house?"

"No," Mr. Ringgold answered, "that would be out of my department."

"H'm, then you couldn't pick them out in that crowd. Of course not. And they seem to have let her slip through their fingers," Mr. Guelpa observed; he showed no particular concern; and his interest in the room seemed to be slight.

He went to Mrs. Benton's room. It was a large bedroom at the back, the only entrance to it being from the hall. It faced south and through the two windows light streamed in cheerily. Here, too, tawdriness and gaudiness were jumbled together, but there was comfort in the easy chairs, the ample bed and the *chaise-longue*. And there were, too, the things a woman wants, mirrors, a dressing-table, frank concessions to the feminine.

It was essentially a woman's room but wrecked with disorder. A silken eider-down was pulled up over the humped bed. Garments lay here and there

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as though they had been tossed by a heedless hand. Towels trailed in the adjoining bathroom. The door of the big closet opened on cast-off slippers, shoes, tumbled gowns. It was as though the former occupant had swept out of the room, tornado-wise, leaving behind a tumult of disorder. Haste! Flight!

But in that hurried departure so much had been left behind—not only the garments that clung round the woman's body had been left and not alone the bed that had drunk in her sleep. She had left more than that in her flight. A shadowy part of herself remained. Impalpable, but real.

It was Mr. Guelpa's theory that the person who occupies a room imprints upon it a shadowy self, and records there not only the physical habitudes, but the habits of thought and emotions. The vibration of those multiple groups of cells that made up the woman who had lived in this room were still pulsating in the ether—still persisting. And Mr. Guelpa knew that the sunlight streaming in had printed upon the walls thronging photographs of Mrs. Benton; they were there; they were too faint to make an impression on the retina of the eye; but sooner or later the camera would be able to capture them—so fast science advances.

Faint and vague. And yet to Mr. Guelpa's highly trained faculties of perception a ghost of the living woman was still in the room. He could perceive it moving slowly, languidly, to and fro, or

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lying there in the *chaise-longue* infinitely quiet, the book fallen from the lazy hand, as she stared, perhaps, at her reflection in the tall mirror on the opposite wall. That was the way he seemed to visualize her. Intuition? Imagination? He would have said that his alert senses, disciplined for many years, had captured the impression and presented it to him complete. Scores of tiny impressions, caught by the senses, revealed her—recreated her. She had left behind her the almost impercetible human odor that only a hound could pick up. Her habitual movements were recorded everywhere—that long chair with the lazy pillows and the fallen book and the mirror. The reading-lamp over the bed was also confirmatory. Mr. Guelpa could see her stretched out there, reading or staring into that other mirror over the dressing-table; a third one hung above the mantelpiece. A dainty lady. A quiet room, its message one of safe repose.

What wild storm of terror had swept through it? What tumult of haste had torn her out of its quietude? Leaving behind them a chaos of disorder.

Mr. Guelpa did not touch the scattered garments. At first he touched nothing, merely standing, his little hat in his hand—after all, it was a lady's room—erect, every sense seemingly alert.

He turned to the motionless Mr. Ringgold, who, waiting in the doorway, had respected his long silence.

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"You had no reason to believe she suspected that an investigation had been set on foot?" Mr. Guelpa inquired.

"Only that she must have recognized me in spite of her denial."

"But why did she go on with it all these days? Send back the papers duly attested? Persist in her claim?"

Mr. Guelpa was questioning himself, rather than the insurance man. "It gave her time to prepare for her flight, of course, but then, since she had time, why this disorder, denoting panic? More than panic. Did she take any luggage away with her? Seemingly not, from what the Japanese boy had said. Then this hurried search of the garments and the room had been made in order to make sure that no clue was left behind."

Smiling approval of himself, Mr. Guelpa went lightly across the floor to the lounge-chair.

"But of course she left many things, eh? She is stamped all over the room. This book," he said, "for instance."

He picked it up carefully with a finger of each hand at top and bottom of the book; it was a volume of verse, quite new, but here and there a page was dog-eared. Three pages. And on each folded leaf, of course, a finger-print had been impressed.

"The obvious," he said lightly, "we do not need very much of that sort of thing. Hair? A woman always leaves hair about. Unfailingly. I really

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think one could trace a woman around the world by what comes off her head. And one little hair! She does not know that every hair of her head is numbered—like a convict—for purposes of identification, eh?"

In the overturned scrap-basket, near the dressing-table, were no papers or scraps of papers, but clinging to the bottom of it were combings of a woman's hair—a twisted bunch of glossy dark brown hair. And with this brown hair were other hairs of a pale sand-color. It was mystifying. And then Mr. Guelpa remembered that there had been two women in that house—Mrs. Benton and Nurse McCune. There was more of the sand-colored hair in the brush, tangled there. It was long and strong; a faded odor of perfume could be discerned.

"A delicate lady you told me, Mr. Ringgold, rather fine? I wonder whether you are a good judge. The hair is rather robust. Would it be that of the nurse?"

"No, that is Mrs. Benton's hair," returned Mr. Ringgold, looking at it closely, "I remember the color perfectly."

"Odd," retorted Mr. Guelpa, "but her fingers will tell. The lady who lived in this room is beginning to recreate herself for me. Hand, hair—and foot?"

He stooped and picked up one of the shoes scattered about. It was quite new and had not yet acquired the shape of the foot; nor had the other

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shoes and slippers. The knitted bed-slippers were shapeless.

"So far as we are concerned," observed Mr. Guelpa, "the lady is footless. Unless—"

What he sorted out of the cast-off garments was a rumpled silk stocking; it was black. He laid it on the table near the book and the bunches of hair.

"Mr. Guelpa—"

George Ringgold at last found voice. He had been watching in his short-sighted way the little man, as he ferreted about; but his hearing was better than his sight.

"That clock's still going," he remarked knowingly.

"Thank you," said Mr. Guelpa, "it is on the hour."

He glanced at the little gilt clock, ticking away on the mantelpiece. It had the old wooden mantelpiece to itself. And it was a very ordinary clock, but Mr. Guelpa walked toward it, slowly, whispering his eternal *"Tiens, tiens!"*

A little man, his head was still higher than the mantel-shelf. That was old, discolored, abraded by the wear of years, rough, too, with neglect. Head sidewise Mr. Guelpa swept the surface with his intent beady eyes. Then again his *"Tiens, tiens!"*

"Dust," he remarked, "old dust. And dust, Mr. Ringgold, is the débris of matter. Now when matter touches matter it leaves its mark, indelible. And you see there are marks in the dust, eh?"

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Mr. Ringgold peered at the wooden shelf.

"But marks of what?" Mr. Guelpa continued, expanding into the talkativeness that took him now and then, for he found it hard always to bottle up that wide general knowledge of his. "You see, the dust has settled there day after day—layer upon layer. So the marks vary in distinctness, but they all are imprints of the same thing. And that, my dear Mr. Ringgold, is cloth. Cloth! The chemist can tell you of what that sifting New York dust is composed, but I! I can tell you what marked it. They dug up in Pompeii a slab of dead lava and on it were the marks of the toga of some one who perished when the city was overwhelmed—the weave of the linen, its web and woof, had remained there for thousands of years. You could have identified that toga for no two pieces of woven cloth are absolutely the same—always there are tiny irregularities individual as the hair on your head. Each thread is numbered. Under the microscope its real individuality comes out. Now this is a heavy weave, you see. Not silk, not cotton, not linen. It is wool.

"Tiens!" and Mr. Guelpa stood back from his inspection of the mantelpiece and faced the insurance man, who was in over his depth.

"Shall I tell you? The man who came here, again and again, leaning always his elbow there on the mantelpiece. You may want to know him. Shall I describe him? Perhaps I may be wrong,

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for you never know the immense number of people who are just the opposite of what they seem to be. But this man? Medium height. You see how his arm lay. And not thin, a well-fed man, both flesh and bone were behind that imprint. He drooped there one elbow on the mantelpiece, moving very little. There is your man, dressed in a rather old gray coat, a shabby man—either from lack of means or carelessness. Calm and slow. He makes no impatient movements. Do you see him?"

Mr. Ringgold shook a perplexed head.

"No? Not even the tweed coat? But there he stood, drooping there, nearly always in the same place, because so he faced the woman who lay on the lounge-chair. Ah!"

Mr. Guelpa chuckled his triumph.

"I do not understand—"

"No? The mark of a coat sleeve in the dust. A tweed coat, worn threadbare at the elbow. And the color? I got it from that tiny tuft of cloth caught in yonder splintered edge of the wooden shelf! And this slumbrous man who wore it would not be Mr. Benton? He was a big red man, you told me, an athlete. A man who stood up. But I should like to see his clothes. His bedroom unfortunately has been cleaned out—stripped. But here, in this closet there might be something." And Mr. Guelpa stuck his head in the closet, looked about and went gingerly in. Deftly, one after the other, he picked up the gowns—

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"What the devil are you doing here!" a big voice crashed. And the door of the bedroom was thrown open. Mr. Ringgold turned with a start to face a bearded man in a huge coat, "and who the devil is that?"

The big man jerked his head toward the placid Mr. Guelpa, who emerged from the closet, a black gown trailing from his hand, a benign smile on his face, his eye-glasses cocked inquiringly.

"And where is my patient?"

"Ah, of course, it is Doctor Hamilton! Permit me, Doctor, we are from the insurance company," Mr. Guelpa said.

"So Nakki told me. He showed me your card. And now where is Mrs. Benton?"

"That is Mr. Ringgold whose card you saw. I? Never mind. We called to see Mrs. Benton, and—"

"Did you expect to find her in the clothes-closet?" Doctor Hamilton inquired grimly.

"No, Doctor, no," replied Mr. Guelpa softly, "and I regret to say she is not there. I wish I knew where she was because I particularly wish to see her. Perhaps you can tell us?"

"I left her in that bed yesterday. She was ill, very ill. She should be there now. Damn it, what has been going on here?" the doctor suddenly demanded.

"Your patient, Doctor, has mysteriously disappeared. She went away last night. Did not Nakki tell you?"

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"He did not. He sent me up here. And so Mrs. Benton went away last night! Why?"

"That is what I intend to find out," Mr. Guelpa answered a trifle sharply, for he did not like a hectoring tone, "and I hope you will help me. I am Mr. Guelpa."

Doctor Hamilton bowed; he was quiet enough now; he lowered his voice to a decent level of respect: "Of course I have heard of you. We have to keep in touch with your work although it is not in my line. And I knew you were in New York, but what the deuce—if you don't mind—are you doing in this thing? The Great Orient must be mighty keen on trying to get out of paying their just dues if they've dragged you into it."

"That is a queer compliment, Doctor. Will you sit down?"

Mr. Guelpa laid aside the black gown and took a chair himself.

"I will tell you what I am doing in this house—and in that clothes-closet! Well? It is merely this. Naturally, before paying the claim, the Great Orient looked into the case. There was Mrs. Benton, yes. But her antecedents."

"Might find a way out of paying! Well, my policy is in the Great Orient, but I can take it out—"

"Perhaps. Mr. Ringgold can tell you. But, Doctor Hamilton, you will permit me a question? You have known Mrs. Benton some time?"

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"I'll answer that. Thank God, I have. I've known her in a way—ever since they took this house."

"And she has talked to you of her earlier life?"

"Why shouldn't she? At least I know about her earlier life. She talked to Nurse McCune and I have it from her."

"Ah, so you know! Her birthplace in Ohio. The father and mother who died. The kind aunt who took care of her. The little fortune."

"Well, what of it?"

"Perhaps, Doctor Hamilton, it will surprise you to hear that every word of that story—every word," Mr. Guelpa shot the statement at him, "is a lie!"

"A lie!"

"False from beginning to end. A foolish invention. A lie. That is why I am here, since you wish to know, sir."

Doctor Hamilton's chivalry stirred in him; his thoughts of his patient—the gentle pale woman he had watched over—were more than kind; but he was broken to worldly wisdom and he did not lift his voice in her defense, save to say: "It may be a mistake."

"There is no mistake. Did she hear of that investigation? We kept it very still. Did something else frighten her? In any case, Doctor Hamilton, your patient has disappeared—into the night."

"Unquestionably you've frightened her. She is a weak, timid little woman. She was ill—the nurse

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had been called away to another case—alone, without friends—"

"Yes," interrupted Mr. Guelpa, "but before this weak, timid little woman disappeared, Doctor, a strong, big man died—and his body was burned up!"

Doctor Hamilton's bull-like torso lumped back in his chair; he was trying to realize the meaning under those appalling words; he did not have time to speak, for Mr. Guelpa was leaning toward him, one hand outstretched, whispering harshly: "What did he die of, Doctor, what did he die of, eh?"

"You have seen the certificate I signed?" was the reply, "that's it."

"His heart, eh? That is the universal cause of death. But what caused it to stop so suddenly?"

"Frankly," Doctor Hamilton exclaimed, suddenly interested, "I wish to the devil I knew. I hadn't seen anything seriously wrong with his heart—not especially—when all at once it went back on us. Of course that happens. But I wish I knew. Indeed I wanted an autopsy, but it was merely to satisfy my own professional curiosity and I could not insist. There was Mrs. Benton to consider, you know, and—"

"She did not want it. I see. And you did not insist. Quite so, Doctor. And one thing more. You do not mind? It is about the cremation of the corpse. It was Mrs. Benton who desired the body should be burned? Of course."

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"On the contrary it was Benton, himself, who wished it. I never heard Mrs. Benton speak of it. She was quite overcome by his death. She left everything to Nurse McCune and me. Even before his illness took a serious turn Benton spoke of it—often. He had theories about being buried alive. You know the kind of person who thinks we doctors are such fools we do not know even how to make sure a man is dead. The cremation was Benton's own idea. His request."

"Did Mrs. Benton hear him talk of it?"

"She may have. She was almost always with him—loyal to the end, I wish to tell you. And your damnable theory that she killed her husband, for I see what you are driving at, is an outrage to humanity," Doctor Hamilton protested in his old fiery way.

"Perhaps? And her disappearance? The trumped-up story of her early life! What do you make of all that, Doctor?"

The big doctor heaved himself impatiently out of his chair:

"What should I know about that," he retorted curtly, and with a "Good day to you," strode indignantly out of the room. The street door had barely closed behind him when Nakki, the Japanese boy, entered and approached Mr. Ringgold, holding out a card.

"Your card?" he inquired blandly.

"Yes."

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"Then the gentleman down-stairs, outside the door, wishes to be admitted, and to speak to you, if you please."

"Who is he?"

Nakki's face announced his ignorance.

"I would suggest you have him brought up into Mr. Benton's room," Mr. Guelpa put in, "I want this room locked and sealed so I may get the impressions I desire to make—and I will do it myself, but now I shall go with you. An unknown man always interests me. He may be any one."

In the naked room where Richard Benton had died, Nakki brought to them a commonplace-looking man, who held in one hand a lighted cigar. He removed his hat and nodded.

"Mr. Ringgold? Yes, I've seen you. They sent me up here from the office. They wanted you to know. Is he all right?" he wagged his head toward Mr. Guelpa.

"Certainly. This is Mr. Guelpa. Say what you have to say."

"I'm Grogan from the Agency. Your woman is missing? Beat it. Got away?"

"Yes, she has disappeared. Were you watching this house?"

"Me and my partner, Tim Lear. She got away all right. Last night it was. Well, so did I and so did Tim Lear. It was a long chase and we nearly lost her more than once. Taxi, street-car, then taxi, trolley-car and then an automobile that was

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waiting for her—but that won't interest you. 'Anyway we ran her down. An' Tim is camped on her. 'And I'm sending up more men. She'll stay where she is till you want her. Like to know where she is?" And Grogan grinned at the two men in front of him.

Mr. Guelpa showed no particular interest in the query. Ringgold waited expectantly.

"Up the Hudson. Westchester County—nice little country place. That's where she's camped this minute. She made it last night."

"You know the house?"

"Sure, it belongs to one of our big guns. He's some expert, I tell you. One of these insanity experts. We've had him in many a case and the woman is tucked away in his house."

"In whose house?" demanded Ringgold.

"Professor Ledsky's."

"Ledsky!"

This exclamation came from the agitated Mr. Ringgold. "Ledsky!"

"One of his dizzy patients, perhaps!"

The insurance man turned to Mr. Guelpa.

"What do you think, sir?"

Mr. Guelpa smiled and said—nothing at all.

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CHAPTER VII

AS DOCTOR HAMILTON went down the steps of the Narrow House into the street two thoughts were busy in his mind—the woman he had held fainting in his arms during the ride back from that burial (in fire and oblivion) of Richard Benton's body; the other nagging thought was of the death certificate he had signed; damn it, were they going to make trouble about that? Thinking of the certificate his mind was in a cursing mood; it had been a sound certificate—heart failure—that's the way these big athletes, when they take to drink and laziness, generally crumple up! No doubt of that. The man died of heart failure as every one does; and in his case the cause of it, as he had stated, was angina. Acute angina striking at him of a sudden. The symptoms all confirmed his diagnosis.

And now these men talked of foul play. Good God! To what lengths wouldn't that insurance company go to save their dirty dollars? It would be a pleasant thing, for him, to be pilloried on the witness-stand and torn apart by a lot of hireling

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experts and savage lawyers. There would not be much of his reputation left, when they were done with him. And damn that little Guelpa and his malicious curiosity. How dared the fellow shake a finger at him, with his infernal "What did he die of, eh?" Gloomily Doctor Hamilton told himself he wished to the deuce he had insisted on an autopsy.

But there was the little woman!

Surely there was no real reason for his going against her. And heaven knows life was hard enough on her and all other women. Now, as he walked heavily toward his office, Doctor Hamilton put aside his own predicament and his thoughts ran, undivided, toward Mrs. Benton. A quiet pretty little thing; gentle and oblivious of herself—just brooding over that brute of a husband with a kind of loyal watchfulness. By jove! she hardly slept during those last weeks. Unselfish, dutiful and in spite of her loss of sleep, her sense of duty held her up. She was always there, ready to help, controlling herself, keeping a sort of pathetic calm—steadiness—

A brave little woman, Doctor Hamilton reflected, poor little thing. No wonder she had disappeared, now these wolves of greed and suspicion were yelping after her. She had stood about all she could; and she had a perfect right to go off for a rest. He was sorry Nurse McCune was not with her. She had been called to another case.

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Mrs. Benton needed friends now—needed not only Mrs. McCune, that invaluable person, but as well, Doctor Hamilton himself. Surely Mrs. Benton would let him know.

His offices and bachelor home were on the first floor of an apartment-house in Tenth Street. He let himself in and went to the table in the reception-room which faced the street. The attendant had left on his desk the memoranda for the day and his telephone calls. They were numerous enough but none of them pressed. Doctor Hamilton was one of those faithful family physicians whose round of life lay amid friends of long standing. In the dozen years or so of his practise he had seen the children grow up—dragged through infantile maladies—had welcomed scores of babies and soothed many a death-bed at which old age or illness struck. His rather boisterous manner covered but did not conceal his fiery zeal for his profession and the tenderness within him. His life had been without upsets and without tragedy—save for his daily battle against death.

And now tragic things were tugging at him: that investigation into Benton's death and the certificate he had granted: and then that terrified woman who had clutched at him, in her panic fear, and collapsed in his arms.

That little woman!

Why that sudden terror?

And why had she fled? Guilty? One might as

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well accuse a white lily of murder. Well, he would do all he possibly could for her.

He had been pacing the room to and fro, and halted now at the window, looking out into the street. A girl was standing there gazing up at the sign which announced his name and profession. When she caught his eye she nodded and smiled and then rang his bell. He opened the door himself and stepped aside to permit her to enter the reception-room.

"You are a doctor, ain't you? Then I guess you'll do," she said, and laughed as though they were old friends glad to see each other. Her laugh ran part way up the scale and then down again; it was charming—and her own. She had round legs and carmine lips and brown smudgy eyes. Moreover her face was nicely painted. A round red hat was crowded down over her ears. She wore a long mouse-colored coat, with fur cuffs and collar. When she threw it open the world saw, with pleasure, lengthy, nude stockings, plumply filled, and low black shoes with buckles. She gave the impression that it was sheer pride that kept her from chewing gum. She threw herself into an easy chair.

Doctor Hamilton was not interested.

This was not the sort of patient who usually entered his reception-room.

"Gee! I'm all in, Doc," she said, "I'll say it! And at that I don't see where I get off."

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