"No Clue!"

James Hay, Jr.

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"NO CLUE!"

A Mystery Story

BY

JAMES HAY, JR.

AUTHOR OF "THE WINNING CLUE,"
"THE MELWOOD MYSTERY"

NEW YORK
DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY
1920

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TO

WILLIAM ("BUCK") HAY

JAN 23 '42 Perine

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"NÓ CLUE!"

I

THE GREY ENVELOPE

CATHERINE BRACE walked slowly from the mantel-piece to the open window and back again. Within the last hour she had done that many times, always to halt before the mantel and gaze at the oblong, grey envelope that leaned against the clock. Evidently, she regarded it as a powerful agency. An observer would have perceived that she saw tremendous things come out of it—and that she considered them with mingled satisfaction and defiance.

Her attitude, however, betrayed no hint of hesitation. Rather, the fixity of her gaze and the intensity of her mental concentration threw into high relief the hardness of her personality. She was singularly devoid of that quality which is generally called feminine softness.

And she was a forceful woman. She had power. It was in her lean, high-shouldered, ungraceful figure. It was in her thin, mobile lips

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and her high-bridged nose with its thin, clean-cut nostrils. She impressed herself upon her environment. Standing there at the mantel, her hands clasped behind her, she was so caught up by the possibilities of the future that she succeeded in imparting to the grey envelope an almost animate quality.

She became aware once more of voices in the next room: a man's light baritone in protest, followed by the taunt of her daughter's laugh. 'Although she left the mantel with lithe, swift step, it was with unusual deliberation that she opened the communicating door.

Her voice was free of excitement when, ignoring her daughter's caller, she said:

"Mildred, just a moment, please."

Mildred came in and closed the door. Her mother, now near the window across the room, looked first at her and then at the grey envelope.

"I thought," Mrs. Brace said, "you'd forgotten you were going to mail it."

"Why didn't you mail it yourself?" The tone of that was cool insolence.

Mother and daughter were strikingly alike—hair piled high in a wide wave above the forehead; black eyes too restless, but of that gleaming brilliance which heralds a refusal to grow old. So far, however, the daughter's features had not assumed an aspect of sharpness, like the

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mother's. One would have appraised the older woman vindictive—malevolent, possibly.

But in the younger face the mouth greatly softened, almost concealed, this effect of calculating hardness. Mildred Brace's lips had a softness of line, a vividness of colouring that indicated emotional depths utterly foreign to her mother.

They bore themselves now as if they commented on a decision already reached, a momentous step to which they had given immense consideration.

"I didn't mail it," Mrs. Brace answered her daughter's query, "because I knew, if you mailed it, you'd do as you'd said you wanted to do."

There was frank emphasis on the "said."

"Your feet don't always follow your intelligence, you know."

"I've been thinking about the thing," Mildred retorted, looking over her mother's shoulder into the summer night. "What's the use?"

"What's the use!" Mrs. Brace echoed, incredulous.

"Just that."

"We've been all over it! You know what it means to you—to both of us."

They spoke in low tones, careful that the man in the living room should not hear.

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"My dear mother," Mildred said, with a return of her cool insolence, "you display a confidence hardly warranted by your—and our—man-experience."

She yawned slightly.

There was a harsher note in her mother's reply.

"He can't refuse. He can't!"

Mildred stared at the grey envelope a full three minutes. Mrs. Brace, wordless, showing no uneasiness as to the outcome, waited for her to speak.

"It's no use, mother," she said at last. "We can't manage it—him—this thing. It's too late."

The flat finality, the dreariness, of that announcement angered the older woman. Calmness fell from her. She came away from the window slowly, her hands clasped tightly at her back, the upper part of her body bending forward a little, her thin nostrils expanding and contracting to the force of her hurried breathing like leaves shaken in the wind. The curl of her thin lips added a curious ferocity to the words that passed them. She spoke, only when her face was within a few inches of Mildred's.

"No use!" she said contemptuously, her lowered voice explosive with passion. "Why? And why too late? Have you no self-respect, no will, no firmness? Are you all jelly and——"

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She got hold of herself with remarkable effectiveness, throwing off the signs of her wrath as suddenly as they had appeared. She retreated a step and laughed, without mirth.

"Oh, well," she said, "it's your party, not mine, after all. But, in future, my dear, don't waste your time and mine in school-girl heroics."

She completed her retreat and stood again at the window. Her self-restraint was, in a way, fiercer than her rage—and it affected her daughter.

"You see," she concluded, "why I didn't mail it. I knew you wouldn't do the very thing you'd outlined."

Mildred looked at the envelope again. The pause that followed was broken by the man in the other room.

"Mildred," he called.

Mrs. Brace laughed silently. Mildred, seeing that ridicule, recoiled.

"What are you laughing at?" she demanded.

Her mother pointed to the communicating door.

"I was thinking of *that*," she said, "for life —and," she looked toward the grey envelope, "the other thing."

"I don't see——" Mildred began, and checked herself, gazing again at the envelope.

Her mother turned swiftly and stood looking

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into the night. The man called again and was not answered. The two women were motionless. There was no sound in the room, save the ticking of the clock on the mantel. Two minutes passed—three.

Mildred went toward the mantel, put out her hand, withdrew it. She became conscious of the excessive heat and touched her forehead with her handkerchief. She glanced at her mother's motionless figure, started to speak, closed her parted lips. Indecision shook her. She put out her hand again, picked up the envelope and stood tapping it against her left palm.

Mrs. Brace, without moving, spoke at last:

"It's a few minutes of twelve. If you catch the midnight collection, he'll get it, out there, by five o'clock tomorrow afternoon."

There was another pause.

Mildred went slowly to the door leading into the living room, and once more she was on the point of speaking.

Mrs. Brace was drumming her fingers on the window ledge. The action announced plainly that she had finished with the situation. Mildred put her hand on the knob, pulled the door half-open, closed it again.

"I've changed my mind," she said, dreariness still in her voice. "He can't refuse."

Her mother made no comment.

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Mildred went into the living room.

"Gene," she said, with that indifference of tone which a woman employs toward a man she despises, "I'm going down to mail this."

"Well, I'll swear!" he quarrelled sullenly. "Been in there all this time writing to him!"

"Yes! Look at it!" she taunted viciously, and waved the envelope before his eyes. "Sloanehurst!"

Taking up his hat, he went with her to the elevator.

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II

THE WOMAN ON THE LAWN

MR. JEFFERSON HASTINGS, unsuspecting that he was about to be confronted with the most brutal crime in all his experience, regretted having come to "Sloanehurst." He disapproved of himself unreservedly. Clad in an ample, antique nightshirt, he stood at a window of the guest-room assigned to him and gazed over the steel rims of his spectacles into the hot, rainy night. His real vision, however, made no attempt to pierce the outer darkness. His eyes were turned inward, upon himself, in derision of his behaviour during the past three hours.

A kindly, reticent gentleman, who looked much older than his fifty-three years, he made it his habit to listen rather than talk. His wide fame as a criminologist and consulting detective had implanted no egotism in him. He abhorred the spotlight.

But tonight Judge Wilton, by skilful use of query, suggestion and reminder, had tempted

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him into talking "shop." He had been lured into the rôle of monologuist for the benefit of his host, Arthur Sloane. He had talked brilliantly, at length, in detail, holding his three hearers in spellbound and fascinated interest while he discoursed on crimes which he had probed and criminals whom he had known.

Not that he *thought* he had talked brilliantly! By no means! He was convinced that nine-tenths of the interest manifested in his remarks had been dictated by politeness. Old Hastings was just that sort of person; he discounted himself. He was in earnest, therefore, in his present self-denunciation. He sighed, remembering the volume of his discourse, the awful length of time in which he had monopolized the conversation.

But his modesty was not his only admirable characteristic. He had, also, a dependable sense of humour. It came to his relief now—he thought of his host, a chuckle throttling the beginnings of a second sigh deep down in his throat.

This was not the first time that Arthur Broughton Sloane had provoked a chuckle, although, for him, life was a house of terror, a torture chamber constructed with fiendish ingenuity. Mr. Sloane suffered from "nerves." He was spending his declining years in the ardu-

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ous but surprisingly succcessful task of being wretched, irritable and ill-at-ease.

The variety of his agonies was equalled only by the alacrity with which he tested every cure or remedy of which he happened to hear. He agreed enthusiastically with his expensive physicians that he was neurasthenic, psychasthenic and neurotic.

His eyes were weak; his voice was weak; his spirit was weak. He shivered all day with terror at the idea of not sleeping at night. Every evening he quivered with horror at the thought of not waking up next morning. And yet, despite these absorbing, although not entirely delightful, preoccupations, Mr. Sloane was not without an object in life.

In fact, he had two objects in life: the happiness of his daughter, Lucille, and the study of crime and criminals. The latter interest had brought Hastings to the Sloane country home in Virginia. Judge Wilton, an old friend of the wrecked and wealthy Mr. Sloane, had met the detective on the street in Washington and urged:

"Go down to Sloanehurst and spend Saturday night. I'll be there when you arrive. Sloane's got his mind set on seeing you; and you won't regret it. His library on criminology will be a revelation, even to you."

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And Hastings, largely because he shrank from seeming ungracious, had accepted Mr. Sloane's subsequent invitation.

Climbing now into the old-fashioned four-poster bed, he thought again of his conversation-spree and longed for self-justification. He sat up, sheetless, reflecting:

"As a week-ender, I'm a fine old chatter-box! —But young Webster got me! What did he say? —'The cleverer the criminal, the easier to run him down. The thug, acting on the spur of the moment, with a blow in the dark and a getaway through the night, leaves no trace behind him. Your "smart criminal" always overreaches himself.'—A pretty theory, but wild. Anyway, it made me forget myself; I talked my old fool head off."

He felt himself blush.

"Wish I'd let Wilton do the disproving; he was anxious enough."

A mental picture of Sloane consoled him once more.

"Silk socks and gingham gumption!" he thought. "But he's honest in his talk about being interested in crime. The man loves crime!—Good thing he's got plenty of money."

He fell asleep, in a kind of ruminative growl:

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"Made a fool of myself—babbling about what *I* remembered—what *I* thought! I'll go back to Washington—in the morning."

Judge Wilton's unsteady voice, supplemented by a rattling of the doorknob, roused him. He had thrust one foot out of bed when Wilton came into the room.

"Quick! Come on, man!" the judge instructed, and hurried into the hall.

"What's wrong?" Hastings demanded, reaching for his spectacles.

Wilton, on his way down the stairs, flung back:

"A woman hurt—outside."

From the hall below came Mr. Sloane's high-pitched, complaining tones:

"Unfathomable angels! What do you say?—Who?"

Drawing on shoes and trousers, the detective overtook his host on the front verandah and followed him down the steps and around the northeast corner of the house. He noticed that Sloane carried in one hand an electric torch and in the other a bottle of smelling salts. It was no longer raining.

Rounding the corner, they saw, scarcely fifteen yards from the bay-window of the ballroom, the upturned face of a woman who lay prostrate on the lawn. Lights had been turned on in the

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house, making a glow which cut through the starless night.

The woman did not move. Judge Wilton was in the act of kneeling beside her.

"Hold on!" Hastings called out. "Don't disturb her—if she's dead."

"She is dead!" said Wilton.

"Who is she?" The detective, trying to find signs of life, put his hand over her heart.

"I don't know," Wilton answered the question. "Do you, Sloane?"

"Of course, I don't!"

Hastings said afterwards that Sloane's reply expressed astonished resentment that he should be suspected of knowing anybody vulgar enough to be murdered on his lawn.

The detective drew back his hand. His fingers were dark with blood.

At that moment Berne Webster, Lucille Sloane's fiancé, came from the rear of the house, announcing breathlessly:

"No 'phone connection—this time of night, judge.—It's past midnight.—I sent chauffeur—Lally—for the sheriff."

Hastings stood up, his first, cursory examination concluded.

"No doubt about it," he said. "She's dead.—Bring a blanket, somebody!"

Mr. Sloane's nerves had the best of him by

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this time. He trembled like a man with a chill, rattling the bottle of smelling salts against the metal end of his electric torch. He had on slippers and a light dressing gown over his pajamas.

Wilton was fully dressed, young Webster collarless but wearing a black, light-weight lounging jacket. Hastings was struck with the different degrees of their dress, or undress.

"Who found her?" he asked, looking at Webster.

"Judge Wilton—and I," said Webster, so short of breath that his chest heaved.

"How long ago?"

Wilton answered that:

"A few minutes, hardly five minutes. I ran in to call you and Sloane."

"And Mr.—you, Mr. Webster?"

"The judge told me to—to get the sheriff—by telephone."

Hastings knelt again over the woman's body.

"Here, Mr. Sloane," he ordered, "hold that torch closer, will you?"

Mr. Sloane found compliance impossible. He could not steady his hand sufficiently.

"Hold that torch, judge," Hastings prompted.

"It's knocked me out—completely," Sloane said, surrendering the torch to Wilton.

Webster, the pallor still on his face, a look of horror in his eyes, stood on the side of the

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body opposite the detective. At brief intervals he raised first one foot, then the other, clear of the ground and set it down again. He was unconscious of making any movement at all.

Hastings, thoroughly absorbed in the work before him, went about it swiftly, with now and then brief, murmured comment on what he did and saw. Although his ample night-shirt, stuffed into his equally baggy trousers, contributed nothing but comicality to his appearance, the others submitted without question to his domination. There was about him suddenly an atmosphere of power that impressed even the little group of awe-struck servants who stood a few feet away.

"Stabbed," he said, after he had run his hands over the woman's figure; "died instantly—must have. Got her heart.—Young—not over twenty-five, would you say?—Not dead long.—Anybody call a doctor?"

"I told Lally to stop by Dr. Garnet's house and send him—at once," Webster said, his voice low, and broken. "He's the coroner, too."

Hastings continued his examination. The brief pause that ensued was broken by a woman's voice:

"Pauline! Pauline!"

The call came from one of the upstairs win-

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dows. Hearing it, a woman in the servant group hurried into the house.

Webster groaned: "My God!"

"Frantic fiends! It gets worse and worse!" Sloane objected shrilly. "My nerves! And Lucille's annoyed—shocked!"

He held the smelling bottle to his nose, breathing deeply.

"Here! Take this!" Hastings directed, and put up his hand abruptly.

Sloane had so gone to pieces that the movement frightened him. He stepped back in such obvious terror that a hoarse guffaw of involuntary ridicule escaped one of the servants. The detective, finding that his kneeling posture made it difficult to put his handkerchief back into his trousers pocket, had thrust it toward Sloane. That gentleman having so suddenly removed himself out of reach, Hastings stuck the handkerchief into Judge Wilton's coat-pocket.

Arthur Sloane, the detective said later, never forgave him that unexpected wave of the handkerchief—and the servant's ridiculing laugh.

Hastings looked up to Wilton.

"Did you find any weapon?"

"I didn't look—didn't take time."

"Neither did I," young Webster added.

Hastings, disregarding the wet grass, was on his hands and knees, searching. He accom-

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plished a complete circuit of the body, his round-shouldered, stooping figure making grotesque, elephantine shadows under the light of the torch as he moved about slowly, not trusting his eyes, but feeling with his hands every inch of the smallest, half-lit spaces.

Nobody else took part in the search. Having accepted his leadership from the outset, they seemed to take it for granted that he needed no help. Mentally benumbed by the horror of the tragedy, they stood there in the quiet, summer night, barren of ideas. They were like children, waiting to be instructed.

Hastings stood erect, pulling and hauling at his trousers.

"Can't find a knife or anything," he said. "Glad I can't. Hope he took it with him."

"Why?" asked Sloane, through chattering teeth.

"May help us to find him—may be a clue in the end."

He was silent a moment, squinting under the rims of his spectacles, looking down at the figure of the dead woman. He had already covered the face with the hat she had worn, a black straw sailor; but neither he nor the others found it easy to forget the peculiar and forbidding expression the features wore, even in death. It was partly fear, partly defiance—as if her last

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conscious thought had been a flitting look into the future, an exulting recognition of the certain consequences of the blow that had struck her down.

Put into words, it might have been: "You've murdered me, but you'll pay for it—terribly!"

A servant handed Hastings the blanket he had ordered. He looked toward the sky.

"I don't think it will rain any more," he said. "And it's best to leave things as they are until the coroner arrives.—He'll be here soon?"

"Should get here in half an hour or so," Judge Wilton informed him.

The detective arranged the blanket so that it covered the prone form completely, leaving the hat over the face as he had first placed it. With the exception of the hat, he had disturbed no part of the apparel. Even the folds of the raincoat, which fell away from the body and showed the rain-soaked black skirt, he left as he had found them. The white shirtwaist, also partly exposed now, was dry.

"Anybody move her hat before I came out?" he asked; "you, judge; or you, Mr. Webster?"

They had not touched it, they said; it was on the grass, beside her head, when they discovered the body, and they had left it there.

Again he was silent, brows drawn together as he stood over the murdered woman. Finally,

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he raised his head swiftly and, taking each in turn, searched sharply the countenances of the three men before him.

"Does—didn't anybody here know this woman?" he asked.

Berne Webster left his place at the opposite side of the body and came close to Hastings.

"I know who she is," he said, his voice lower even than before, as if he wished to keep that information from the servants.

Hastings' keen scrutiny had in it no intimation of surprise. Waiting for Webster to continue, he was addressed by the shivering Mr. Sloane:

"Mr. Hast—Mr. Hastings, take charge of —of things. Will you? You know about these things."

The detective accepted the suggestion.

"Suppose we get at what we know about it —what we all know. Let's go inside." He turned to the servants: "Stay here until you're called. See that nothing is disturbed, nothing touched."

He led the way into the house. Sloane, near collapse, clung to one of Judge Wilton's broad shoulders. It was young Webster who, as the little procession passed the hatrack in the front hall, caught up a raincoat and threw it over the half-clad Hastings.

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III

THE UNEXPECTED WITNESS

IN the library Hastings turned first to Judge Wilton for a description of the discovery of the body. The judge was in better condition than the others for connected narrative, Arthur Sloane had sunk into a morris chair, where he sighed audibly and plied himself by fits and starts with the aroma from the bottle of smelling salts. Young Webster, still breathing as if he had been through exhausting physical endeavour, stood near the table in the centre of the room, mechanically shifting his weight from foot to foot.

Wilton, seated half-across the room from Hastings, drew, absently, on a dead cigar-stump. A certain rasping note in his voice was his only remaining symptom of shock. He had the stern calmness of expression that is often seen in the broad, irregularly-featured face in early middle age.

"I can tell you in very few words," he said, addressing the detective directly. "We all left this room, you'll remember, at eleven o'clock.

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I found my bedroom uncomfortable, too warm. Besides, it had stopped raining. When I noticed that, I decided to go out and smoke my good-night cigar. This is what's left of it."

He put a finger to the unlighted stump still between his lips.

"What time did you go out?" asked Hastings.

"Probably, a quarter of an hour after I'd gone upstairs—fifteen or twenty minutes past eleven, I should guess."

"How did you go out—by what door?"

"The front door. I left it unlocked, but not open. At first I paced up and down, on the south side of the house, under the trees. It was reasonably light there then—that is to say, the clouds had thinned a little, and, after my eyes had got accustomed to it, I had no trouble in avoiding the trees and shrubbery.

"Then a cloud heavier than the others came up, I suppose. Anyway, it was much darker. There wasn't a light in the house, except in my room and Berne Webster's. Yours was out, I remember. I passed by the front of the house then, and went around to the north side. It was darker there, I thought, than it had been under the trees on the south side."

"How long had you been out then, altogether?"

"Thirty or forty minutes." He looked at his

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watch. "It's a quarter past twelve now. Let me see. I found the body a few minutes after I changed over to the north side. I guess I found it about five minutes before midnight—certainly not more than twenty minutes ago."

Hastings betrayed his impatience only by squinting under his spectacles and down the line of his nose, eying Wilton closely.

"All right, judge! Let's have it."

"I was going along slowly, very slowly, not doing much more than feeling my way with my feet on the close-shaven grass. It was the darkest night I ever saw. Literally, I couldn't have seen my hand in front of me.

"I had decided to turn about and go indoors when I was conscious of some movement, or slight sound, directly in front of me, and downward, at my feet. I got that impression."

"What movement? You mean the sound of a fall?"

"No; not that exactly."

"A footstep?"

"No. I hadn't any definite idea what sort of noise it was. I did think that, perhaps, it was a dog or a cat. Just then my foot came in contact with something soft. I stooped down instinctively, immediately.

"At that moment, that very second, a light flashed on in Arthur's bedroom. That's between

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this room and the big ballroom—on this floor, of course. That light threw a long, illuminating shaft into the murky darkness, the end of it coming just far enough to touch me and—what I found—the woman's body. I saw it by that light before I had time to touch it with my hand."

The judge stopped and drew heavily on his dead cigar.

"All right. See anything else?" Hastings urged.

"Yes; I saw Berne Webster. He had made the noise which attracted my attention."

"How do you know that?"

"He must have. He was stooping down, too, on the other side of the body, facing me, when the light went on——"

Sloane, twisting nervously in his chair, cut into Wilton's narrative.

"I can put this much straight," he said in shrill complaint: "I turned on the light you're talking about. I hadn't been able to sleep."

"Let's have this, one at a time, if you don't mind, Mr. Sloane," the detective suggested, watching Webster.

The young man, staring with fascinated intensity at Judge Wilton, seemed to experience some new horror as he listened.

"He was on the other side of it," the judge

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continued, "and practically in the same position that I was. We faced each other across the body. I think that describes the discovery, as you call it. We immediately examined the woman, looking for the wound, and found it. When we saw she was dead, we came in to wake you—and try to get a doctor. I told Berne to do that."

During the last few sentences Hastings had been walking slowly from his chair to the library door and back, his hands gouged deep into his trouser-pockets, folds of his night-shirt protruding from and falling over the waistband of the trousers, the raincoat hanging baggily from his shoulders. Ludicrous as the costume was, however, the old man so dominated them still that none of them, not even Wilton, questioned his authority.

And yet, the thing he was doing should have appealed to them as noteworthy. A man of less power could not have accomplished it. Coming from a sound sleep to the scene of a murder, he had literally picked up these men who had discovered it and who must be closely touched by it, had overcome their agitation, had herded them into the house and, with amazing promptness, had set about the task of getting from them the stories of what they knew and what they had done.

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Appreciating his opportunity, he had determined to bring to light at once everything they knew. He devoted sudden attention now to Webster, whom he knew by reputation—a lawyer thirty years of age, brilliant in the criminal courts, and at present striving for a foothold in the more remunerative ranks of civil practice. He had never been introduced to him, however, before meeting him at Sloanehurst.

"Who touched that body first—Mr. Webster?" he demanded, his slow promenade uninterrupted as he kept his eyes on the lawyer's.

"Judge—I don't know, I believe," Webster replied uncertainly. "Who did, judge?"

"I want your recollection," Hastings insisted, kindly in spite of the unmistakable command of his tone. "That's why I asked you."

"Why?"

"For one thing, it might go far toward showing who was really first on the scene."

"I see; but I really don't remember. I'm not sure that either of us touched the body—just then. I think we both drew back, instinctively, when the light flashed on. Afterwards, of course, we both touched her—looking for signs of life."

The detective came to a standstill in front of Webster.

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"Who reached the body first? Can you say?"

"No. I don't think either was first. We got there together."

"Simultaneously?"

"Yes."

"But I'm overlooking something. How did you happen to be there?"

"That's simple enough," Webster said, his brows drawn together, his eyes toward the floor, evidently making great effort to omit no detail of what had occcurred. "I went to my room when we broke up here, at eleven. I read for a while. I got tired of that—it was close and hot. Besides, I never go to bed before one in the morning—that is, practically never. And I wasn't sleepy.

"I looked at my watch. It was a quarter to twelve. Like the judge, I noticed that it had stopped raining. I thought I'd have a better night's sleep if I got out and cooled off thoroughly. My room, the one I have this time, is close to the back stairway. I went down that, and out the door on the north side."

"Were you smoking?" Hastings put the query sharply, as if to test the narrator's nerves. Webster's frown deepened.

"No. But I had cigarettes and matches with me. I intended to smoke—and walk about."

"But what happened?"

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"It was so much darker than I had thought that I groped along with my feet, much as Judge Wilton did. I was making my way toward the front verandah. I went on, sliding my feet on the wet grass."

"Any reason for doing that, do you remember? Are there any obstructions there, anything but smooth, open lawn?"

"No. It was merely an instinctive act—in pitch dark, you know."

Webster, his eyes still toward the floor, waited for another question. Not getting it, he resumed:

"My foot struck something soft. I thought it was a wet cloak, something of that sort, left out in the rain. I hadn't heard a thing. And I had no premonition of anything wrong. I bent over, with nothing more than sheer idle curiosity, to put my hand on whatever the thing was. And just then the light went on in Mr. Sloane's bedroom. The judge and I were looking at each other across somebody lying on the ground, face upward."

"Either of you cry out?"

"No."

"Say anything?"

"Not much."

"Well, what?"

"I remember the judge said, 'Is she dead?'

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I said, 'How is she hurt?' We didn't say much while we were looking for the wound."

"Did you tell Judge Wilton you knew her?"

"No. There wasn't time for any explanation —specially."

"But you do know her?"

"I told you that, sir, outside—just now."

"All right. Who is she?" Hastings put that query carelessly, in a way which might have meant that he had heard the most important part of the young lawyer's story. That impression was heightened by his beginning again to pace the floor.

"Her name's Mildred Brace," replied Webster, moistening his lips with his tongue. "She was my stenographer for eight months."

The detective drew up sharply.

"When?"

"Until two weeks ago."

"She resign?"

"Yes. No—I discharged her."

"What for?"

"Incompetence."

"I don't understand that exactly. You mean you employed her eight months although she was incompetent?"

"That's pretty bald," Webster objected. "Her incompetence came, rather, from temperament. She was, toward the last, too nervous,

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excitable. She was more trouble than she was worth."

"Ah, that's different," Hastings said, with a significance that was clear. "People might have thought," he elaborated, "if you had fired her for other reasons, this tragedy tonight would have put you in an unenviable position—to say the least."

He had given words to the vague feeling which had depressed them all, ever since the discovery of the murder; that here was something vastly greater than the accidental finding of a person killed by an outsider, that the crime touched Sloanehurst personally. The foreboding had been patent—almost, it seemed, a tangible thing—but, until this moment, each had steered clear of it, in speech.

Webster's response was bitter.

"They'll want to say it anyway, I guess." To that he added, in frank resentment: "And I might as well enter a denial here: I had nothing to do with the—this whole lamentable affair!"

The silence in which he and Hastings regarded each other was broken by Arthur Sloane's querulous words:

"Why—why, in the name of all the inscrutable saints, this thing should have happened at Sloanehurst, is more than I can say! Jumping angels! Now, let me tell you what I——"

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He stopped, hearing light footfalls coming down the hall. There was the swish of silk, a little outcry half-repressed, and Lucille Sloane stood in the doorway. One hand was at her breast, the other against the door-frame, to steady her tall, slightly swaying figure. Her hair, a pyramid on her head, as if the black, heavy masses of it had been done by hurrying fingers, gave to her unusual beauty now an added suggestion of dignity.

Profoundly moved as she was, there was nothing of the distracted or the inadequate about her. Hastings, who had admired her earlier in the evening, saw that her poise was far from overthrown. It seemed to him that she even had considered how to wear with extraordinary effect the brilliant, vari-coloured kimono draped about her. The only criticism of her possible was that, perhaps, she seemed a trifle too imperious—but, for his part, he liked that.

"A thoroughbred!" he catalogued her, mentally.

"You will excuse me, father," she said from the doorway, "but I couldn't help hearing." She thrust forward her chin. "Oh, I had to hear!—And there's something I have to tell."

Her glance went at last from Sloane to Hastings as she advanced slowly into the room.

The detective pushed forward a chair for her.

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"That's fine, Miss Sloane," he assured her. "I'm sure you're going to help us."

"It isn't much," she qualified, "but I think it's important."

Still she looked at neither Berne Webster nor Judge Wilton. And only a man trained as Hastings was to keenness of observation would have seen the slight but incessant tremour of her fingers and the constant, convulsive play of the muscles under the light covering of her black silk slippers.

Sloane, alone, had remained seated. She was looking up to Hastings, who stood several feet in front of Webster and the judge.

"I had gone to sleep," she said, her voice low, but musical and clear. "I waked up when I heard father moving about—his room is directly under mine; and, now that Aunt Lucy is away, I'm always more or less anxious about him. And I knew he had got quiet earlier, gone to sleep. It wasn't like him to be awake again so soon.

"I sprang out of bed, really very quickly. I listened for a few seconds, but there was no further sound in father's room. The night was unusually quiet. There wasn't a sound—at first. Then I heard something. It was like somebody running, running very fast, outside, on the grass."

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She paused. Hastings was struck by her air of alertness, or of prepared waiting, of readiness for questions.

"Which way did the footsteps go?" he asked.

"From the house—down the slope, toward the little gate that opens on the road."

"Then what?"

"I wondered idly what it meant, but it made no serious impression on me. I listened again for sounds in father's room. There was none. Struck again by the heavy silence—it was almost oppressive, coming after the rain—I went to the window. I stood there, I don't know how long. I think I was day-dreaming, lazily running things over in my mind. I don't think it was very long.

"And then father turned on the light in his room." She made a quick gesture with her left hand, wonderfully expressive of shock. "I shall never forget that! The long, narrow panel of light reached out into the dark like an ugly, yellow arm—reached out just far enough to touch and lay hold of the picture there on the grass; a woman lying on the drenched ground, her face up, and bending over her Judge Wilton and Berne—Mr. Webster.

"I knew she'd been hurt dreadfully; her feet were drawn up, her knees high; and I could see the looks of horror on the men's faces."

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She paused, giving all her strength to the effort to retain her self-control before the assailing memory of what she had seen.

"That was all, Miss Sloane?" the detective prompted, in a kindly tone.

"Yes, quite," she said. "But I'd heard Berne's—what he was saying to you—and the judge's description of what they'd seen; and I thought you would like to know of the footsteps I'd heard—because they were the murderer's; they must have been. I knew it was important, most important."

"You were entirely right," he agreed warmly. "Thank you, very much."

He went the length of the room and halted by one of the bookcases, a weird, lumpy old figure among the shadows in the corner. He was scraping his cheek with his thumb, and looking at the ceiling, over the rims of his spectacles.

Arthur Sloane sighed his impatience.

"Those knees drawn up," Hastings said at last; "I was just thinking. They weren't drawn up when I saw the body. Were they?"

"We'd straightened the limbs," Webster answered. "Thought I'd mentioned that."

"No.—Then, there might have been a struggle? You think the woman had put up a fight—for her life?—and was overpowered?"

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"Well," deliberated Webster, "perhaps; even probably."

"Strange," commented the detective, equally deliberate. "I hadn't thought so. I would have said she'd been struck down unawares—without the slightest warning."

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IV

HASTINGS IS RETAINED

ARRIVAL of the officials, Sheriff Crown and the coroner, Dr. Garnet, brought the conference to an abrupt close. Hastings, seeing the look in the girl's eyes, left the library in advance of the other men. Lucille followed him immediately.

"Mr. Hastings!"

"Yes, Miss Sloane?"

He turned and faced her.

"I must talk to you, alone. Won't you come in here?"

She preceded him into the parlour across the hall. When he put his hand on the electric switch, she objected, saying she preferred to be without the lights. He obeyed her. The glow from the hall was strong enough to show him the play of her features—which was what he wanted.

They sat facing each other, directly under the chandelier in the middle of the spacious room. He thought she had chosen that place to avoid

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all danger of being overheard in any direction. He saw, too, that she was hesitant, half-regretting having brought him there. He read her doubts, saw how pain and anxiety mingled in her wide-open grey eyes.

"Yes, I know," he said with a smile that was reassuring; "I don't look like a particularly helpful old party, do I?"

He liked her more and more. In presence of mind, he reflected, she surpassed the men of the household. In spite of the agitation that still kept her hands trembling and gave her that odd look of fighting desperately to hold herself together, she had formed a plan which she was on the point of disclosing to him.

Her courage impressed him tremendously. And, divining what her request would be, he made up his mind to help her.

"It's not that," she said, her lips twisting to the pretence of a smile. "I know your reputation—how brilliant you are. I was thinking you might not understand what I wanted to say."

"Try me," he encouraged. "I'm not that old!"

It occurred to him that she referred to Berne Webster and herself, fearing, perhaps, his lack of sympathy for a love affair.

"It's this," she began a rush of words, put-

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ting away all reluctance: "I think I realize more keenly than father how disagreeable this awful thing is going to be—the publicity, the newspapers, the questions, the photographs. I know, too, that Mr. Webster's in an unpleasant situation. I heard what he said to you in the library, every word of it.—But I don't have to think about him so much as about my father. He's a very sick man, Mr. Hastings. The shock of this, the resultant shocks lasting through days and weeks, may be fatal for him.

"Besides," she explained, attaining greater composure, "he is so nervous, so impatient of discomfort and irritating things, that he may bring upon himself the enmity of the authorities, the investigators. He may easily provoke them so that they would do anything to annoy him.

"I see you don't understand!" she lamented suddenly, turning her head away a little.

He could see how her lips trembled, as if she held them together only by immense resolution.

"I think I do," he contradicted kindly. "You want my help; isn't that it?"

"Yes." She looked at him again, with a quick turn of her head, her eyes less wide-open while she searched his face. "I want to employ you. Can't I—what do they call it?—retain you?"

"To do what, exactly?"

"Oh-h-h!" The exclamation had the hint of

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a sob in it; she was close to the end of her strength. "I'm a little uncertain about that. Can't you help me there? I want the real criminal found soon, immediately, as soon as possible. I want you to work on that. And, in the meantime, I want you to protect us—father—do things so that we shan't be overrun by reporters and detectives, all the dreadful results of the discovery of a murder at our very front door."

He was thoughtful, looking into her eyes.

"The fee is of no matter, the amount of it," she added impulsively.

"I wasn't thinking of that—although, of course, I don't despise fees. You see, the authorities, the sheriff, might not want my assistance, as you call it. Generally, they don't. They look upon it as interference and meddling."

"Still, you can work independently—retained by Mr. Arthur Sloane—can't you?"

He studied her further. For her age—hardly more than twenty-two—she was strikingly mature of face, and self-reliant. She had, he concluded, unusual strength of purpose; she was capable of large emotionalism, but mere feeling would never cloud her mind.

"Yes," he answered her; "I can do that. I will."

"Ah," she breathed, some of the tenseness going out of her, "you are very good!"

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"And you will help me, of course."

"Of course."

"You can do so now," he pressed this point. "Why is it that all of you—I noticed it in the men in the library, and when we were outside, on the lawn—why is it that all of you think this crime is going to hit you, one of you, so hard? You seem to acknowledge in advance the guilt of one of you."

"Aren't you mistaken about that?"

"No. It struck me forcibly. Didn't you feel it? Don't you, now?"

"Why, no!"

He was certain that she was not frank with him.

"You mean," she added quickly, eyes narrowed, "I suspect—actually suspect some one in this house?"

In his turn, he was non-committal, retorting:

"Don't you?"

She resented his insistence.

"There is only one idea possible, I think," she declared, rising: "the footsteps that I heard fled from the house, not into it. The murderer is not here."

He stood up, holding her gaze.

"I'm your representative now, Miss Sloane," he said, his manner fatherly in its solicitude. "My duty is to save you, and yours, in every

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way I can—without breaking the law. You realize what my job is—do you?"

"Yes, Mr. Hastings."

"And the advisability, the necessity, of utter frankness between us?"

"Yes." She said that with obvious impatience.

"So," he persisted, "you understand my motive in asking you now: is there nothing more you can tell me—of what you heard and saw, when you were at your window?"

"Nothing—absolutely," she said, again obviously annoyed.

He was close to a refusal to have anything to do with the case. He was sure that she did not deal openly with him. He tried again:

"Nothing more, Miss Sloane? Think, please. Nothing to make you, us, more suspicious of Mr. Webster?"

"Suspect Berne!"

This time she was frank, he saw at once. The idea of the young lawyer's guilt struck her as out of the question. Her confidence in that was genuine, unalloyed. It was so emphatic that it surprised him. Why, then, this anxiety which had driven her to him for help? What caused the fear which, at the beginning of their interview, had been so apparent?

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He thought with great rapidity, turning the thing over in his mind as he stood confronting her. If she did not suspect Webster, whom did she suspect? Her father?

That was it!—her father!

The discovery astounded Hastings—and appealed to his sympathy, tremendously.

"My poor child!" he said, on the warm impulse of his compassion.

She chose to disregard the tone he had used. She took a step toward the door, and paused, to see that he followed her.

He went nearer to her, to conclude what he had wanted to say:

"I shall rely on this agreement between us: I can come to you on any point that occurs to me? You will give me anything, and all the things, that may come to your knowledge as the investigation proceeds? Is it a bargain, Miss Sloane?"

"A bargain, Mr. Hastings," she assented. "I appreciate, as well as you do, the need of fair dealing between us. Anything else would be foolish."

"Fine! That's great, Miss Sloane!" He was still sorry for her. "Now, let me be sure, once for all: you're concealing nothing from me, no little thing even, on the theory that it would be of no use to me and, therefore, not worth dis-

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