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That Mainwaring Affair

By

A. Maynard Barbour

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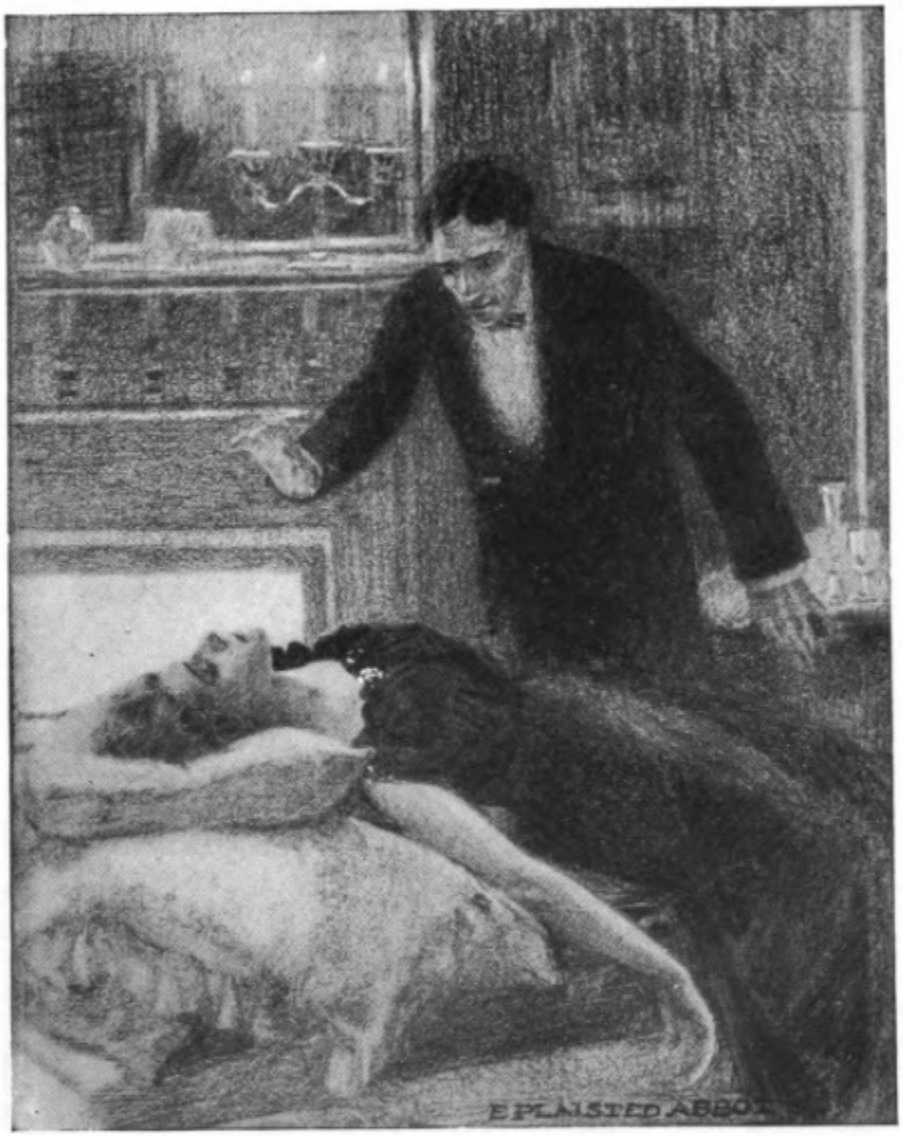

"I HAVE STAKED MY HIGHEST CARD—
AND LOST!"

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THAT MAINWARING AFFAIR

BY

A. MAYNARD BARBOUR

AUTHOR OF "THE AWARD OF JUSTICE"

ILLUSTRATED BY

E. PLAISTED ABBOTT

GROSSET & DUNLAP
Publishers New York

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Inscribed

TO

COLONEL WILBUR F. SANDERS

THE

"WAR-HORSE"

OF

THE TREASURE STATE

BY

THE AUTHOR

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THAT MAINWARING AFFAIR

CHAPTER I

THE MAINWARINGS

THE fierce sunlight of a sultry afternoon in the early part of July forced its way through every crevice and cranny of the closely drawn shutters in the luxurious private offices of Mainwaring & Co., Stock Brokers, and slender shafts of light, darting here and there, lent a rich glow of color to the otherwise subdued tones of the elegant apartments.

A glance at the four occupants of one of these rooms, who had disposed themselves in various attitudes according to their individual inclinations, revealed the fact that three out of the four were Englishmen, while the fourth might have been denominated as a typical American from the professional class. Of rather slender form, with a face of rare sensitiveness and delicacy, and restless, penetrating eyes, his every movement indicated energy and alertness. On the present occasion he had little to say, but was engaged in listening attentively to the conversation of the others.

Beside a rosewood desk, whose belongings, arranged with mathematical precision, indicated the methodical business habits of its owner, sat Hugh Mainwaring, senior member

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of the firm of Mainwaring & Co., a man approaching his fiftieth birthday. His dress and manners, less pronouncedly English than those of the remaining two, betokened the polished man of the world as well as the shrewd financier. He wore an elegant business suit and his linen was immaculate; his hair, dark and slightly tinged with gray, was closely cut; his smoothly shaven face, less florid than those of his companions, was particularly noticeable on account of a pair of dark gray eyes, cold and calculating, and which had at times a steel-like glitter. Though an attractive face, it was not altogether pleasing; it was too sensuous, and indicated stubbornness and self-will rather than firmness or strength.

Half reclining upon a couch on the opposite side of the room, in an attitude more comfortable than graceful, leisurely smoking a fine Havana, was Ralph Mainwaring, of London, a cousin of the New York broker, who, at the invitation of the latter, was paying his first visit to the great western metropolis. Between the two cousins there were few points of resemblance. Both had the same cold, calculating gaze, which made one, subjected to its scrutiny, feel that he was being mentally weighed and measured and would, in all probability, be found lacking; but the Londoner possessed a more phlegmatic temperament. A year or two his cousin's junior, he looked considerably younger, as his hair and heavy English side whiskers were unmixed with gray and he was inclined to stoutness.

Seated near him, in an immense arm-chair which he filled admirably, was William Mainwaring Thornton, of London, also a guest of Hugh Mainwaring and distantly connected with the two cousins. He was the youngest of the three Englishmen and the embodiment of geniality. He was a blond of the purest type, and his beard, parted in the centre, was brushed back in two wavy, silken masses,

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while his clear blue eyes, beaming with kindliness and good-humor, had the frankness of a child's.

Hugh Mainwaring, the sole heir to the family estate, soon after the death of his father, some twenty-five years previous to this time, became weary of the monotony of his English home-life, and, resolved upon making his permanent home in one of the large eastern cities of the United States and embarking upon the uncertain and treacherous seas of speculation in the western world, had sold the estate which for a number of generations had been in the possession of the Mainwarings, and had come to America. In addition to his heavy capital, he had invested a large amount of keen business tact and ability; his venture had met with almost phenomenal success and he had acquired immense wealth besides his inherited fortune.

His more conservative cousin, Ralph Mainwaring, while never quite forgiving him for having disposed of the estate, had, nevertheless, with the shrewdness and foresight for which his family were noted, given to his only son the name of Hugh Mainwaring, confident that his American-English cousin would never marry, and hoping thereby to win back the old Mainwaring estate into his own line of the family. His bit of strategy had succeeded; and now, after more than twenty years, his foresight and worldly wisdom were about to be rewarded, for the occasion of this reunion between the long-separated cousins was the celebration of the rapidly approaching fiftieth birthday of Hugh Mainwaring, at which time Hugh Mainwaring, Jr., would attain his majority, and in recognition of that happy event the New York millionaire broker had announced his intention of making his will in favor of his namesake, and on that day formally declaring him his lawful heir.

This had been the object of the conference in the private

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office of Hugh Mainwaring, and now that it was over and all necessary arrangements had been made, that gentleman turned from his desk with a sigh of relief.

"I am heartily glad that this business is over," he said, addressing his guests; "it has been on my mind for some time, and I have consulted with Mr. Whitney about it," with a slight nod towards the fourth gentleman, who was his attorney and legal adviser. "We have both felt that it should have been attended to before this; and yet, as I considered this would be the most fitting time to make a final adjustment of affairs, I have on that account delayed longer than I otherwise would have done. Now everything is arranged in a manner satisfactory, I trust, to all parties immediately concerned, and nothing remains but to draw up and execute the papers, which will be done to-morrow."

"You are not then troubled with any unpleasant superstitions regarding the making of a will?" commented Mr. Thornton.

"No," replied the other, slowly. "I am not of the opinion that it will hasten my exit from this world; but even if it did, I would have the satisfaction of knowing that my own wishes would be carried out in the settlement of my estate, and that no one would derive any benefit from my demise excepting those whom I consider legally entitled thereto."

Ralph Mainwaring looked curiously at his cousin through half-closed eyes.

"I suppose," he remarked, very deliberately, "that even in case there were no will the property would revert to our branch of the family; we are the nearest of kin, you know."

"Yes, I know your family would be considered the lawful heirs," Hugh Mainwaring replied, while he and

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Mr. Whitney exchanged glances; "but this is not England; here any common adventurer might come forward with some pretended claim against the estate, and I prefer to see affairs definitely settled in my own way."

"Of course," responded the other, resuming his cigar. "Well, speaking for myself, I am more than willing to relinquish any share I might have had for the boy's sake, and I don't suppose, Thornton, that you have any objections to raise on Edith's account."

"Oh, no, no," replied that gentleman, with a pleasant laugh. "I never considered Hugh a bad son-in-law to begin with, but I'll admit he is a little more attractive now than ever."

The little clock on the marble mantel chimed the hour of four, causing a general movement of surprise.

"'Pon my soul! I had no idea it was that late," exclaimed Mr. Thornton, taking out his watch, while Hugh Mainwaring, touching an electric button, replied,—

"This business has detained us much longer than I anticipated. I will give some instructions to the head clerk, and we will leave at once."

He had scarcely finished speaking, when a door opened noiselessly and a middle-aged man appeared.

"Parsons," said Mr. Mainwaring, addressing him in quick, incisive tones, "I am going out to Fair Oaks, and probably shall not be at the office for two or three days, unless something of unusual importance should demand my presence. Refer all business callers to Mr. Elliott or Mr. Chittenden. Any personal calls, if specially important, just say that I can be found at Fair Oaks."

Parsons bowed gravely, and after a few further instructions retired.

"Now, Mr. Whitney," Hugh Mainwaring continued, at the same time touching another electric button, "you, of

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course, will be one of our party at Fair Oaks; my secretary will accompany us, and the papers will be drawn up to-morrow in my private library, after which you will do us the honor to join us in the pleasures of the following day."

"I am at your service, Mr. Mainwaring," responded the attorney; "but," he added, in low tones, intended only for Hugh Mainwaring's ear, but which were heard distinctly by the private secretary, now standing beside the desk, "would it not be better to draw up the will here, in your private office? My presence at the house on the present occasion might attract attention and arouse some suspicions as to your intentions."

"That makes no difference," replied Hugh Mainwaring, quickly, but also speaking in a low tone; "my private papers are all at the house, and I choose that this business shall be conducted there. I believe that I am master in my own house yet."

Mr. Whitney bowed in acquiescence, and Hugh Mainwaring turned to his secretary,—

"Mr. Scott, just close up everything in the office as quickly as possible and get ready to accompany me to Fair Oaks; I shall need you there for two or three days."

It was not the first time the private secretary had accompanied Mr. Mainwaring to his elegant suburban residence, and he understood perfectly what was expected of him, and immediately withdrew to make his preparations as expeditiously as possible.

For some reason, which Hugh Mainwaring had never stopped to explain even to himself, he always accorded to his private secretary much more respect and consideration than to any one of his other numerous employees.

Harry Scott was not only a young man of superior education and good breeding, but what particularly impressed

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his employer in his favor was a certain natural reserve which caused him to hold himself aloof from his associates in the offices of Mainwaring & Co., and an innate refinement and delicacy which kept him, under all circumstances, from any *gaucherie* on the one hand, or undue familiarity on the other; he was always respectful but never servile. He had been in the employ of Hugh Mainwaring for a little more than a year, and, having frequently accompanied him to Fair Oaks to remain for a day or two, was, consequently, quite familiar with the house and grounds.

As he re-entered the room, having exchanged his business suit for one more suitable to the occasion, there was not one present but what instinctively, though perhaps unconsciously, recognized in him a true gentleman and treated him as such. Tall, with a splendid physique, finely shaped head, dark hair, and eyes of peculiar beauty, he was far from being the least attractive member of the party which, a few moments later, entered the Mainwaring carriage, with its coat of arms, and rolled away in the direction of Fair Oaks.

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CHAPTER II

FAIR OAKS

THE home of Hugh Mainwaring was one of many palatial suburban residences situated on a beautiful avenue running in a northerly direction from the city, but it had not been for so many years in his possession without acquiring some of the characteristics of its owner, which gave it an individuality quite distinct from its elegant neighbors. It had originally belonged to one of the oldest and wealthiest families in the county, for a strictly modern house, without a vestige of antiqueness lingering in its halls and with no faint aroma of bygone days pervading its atmosphere, would have been entirely too plebeian to suit the tastes of Hugh Mainwaring.

From the street to the main entrance a broad driveway wound beneath the interlacing boughs of a double line of giant oaks, from which the place had derived its name. Beautiful grounds extended in every direction, and in the rear of the mansion sloped gently to the edge of a small lake. Facing the west was the main entrance to the house, which was nearly surrounded by a broad veranda, commanding a fine view, not only of the grounds and immediately surrounding country, but also of the Hudson River, not far distant.

The southwestern portion of the building contained the private rooms of Hugh Mainwaring, including what was known as the "tower," and had been added by him soon after he had taken possession of the place. This part of

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the house was as far removed as possible from the large reception-rooms, and the apartments on the second floor comprised the suite occupied by Mr. Mainwaring. The first of these rooms, semi-octagonal in form, constituted his private library, and its elegant furnishings and costly volumes, lining the walls from floor to ceiling, bespoke the wealth and taste of the owner. Across the southwestern side of this room heavy portières partially concealed the entrance to what Mr. Mainwaring denominated his "sanctum sanctorum," the room in the tower. This was small, of circular form, and contained an immense desk, one or two revolving bookcases, and a large safe, which held his private papers and, it was rumored, the old Mainwaring jewels. Back of the library was a smoking-room, and in the rear of that Mr. Mainwaring's dressing-rooms and sleeping apartments.

This suite of rooms was connected with the remainder of the building by a long corridor extending from the main hall, but there was on the south side of the house an entrance and stairway leading directly to these rooms, the upper hall opening into the library and smoking-room. From this southern entrance a gravelled walk led between lines of shrubbery to a fine grove, which extended back and downward to the western shore of the small lake already mentioned.

But the especially distinguishing characteristic of Fair Oaks since coming into the possession of Hugh Mainwaring was the general air of exclusion pervading the entire place. The servants, with the exception of "Uncle Mose," the colored man having charge of the grounds, were imported, —the head cook being a Frenchman, the others either English or Irish, and, from butler to chambermaid, one and all seemed to have acquired the reserve which characterized their employer.

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Comparatively few servants were employed and few were needed, for never, until the present occasion, had Fair Oaks been thrown open to guests. Occasionally Mr. Mainwaring brought out from the city two or three gentleman friends, whom he entertained in royal fashion. Sometimes these guests were accompanied by their wives, but such instances were extremely rare, as ladies were seldom seen at Fair Oaks.

In the entertainment of these occasional guests Mr. Mainwaring was frequently assisted by Mrs. LaGrange, known as his housekeeper, but in reality holding a position much more advanced than is usually implied by that term. Among those who had been personally entertained by Mrs. LaGrange, this fact, of itself, excited little comment; it being evident that she was as familiar with the fashionable world as was their host himself, but surrounding her was the same dim haze of mystery that seemed to envelop the entire place, impalpable, but thus far impenetrable.

She had come to Fair Oaks some fifteen years previous to this time, dressed in deep mourning, accompanied by her infant son, about three years of age, and it was generally understood that she was distantly related to Mr. Mainwaring. She was a strikingly handsome woman, with that type of physical beauty which commands admiration, rather than winning it; tall, with superb form and carriage, rich olive skin, large dark eyes, brilliant as diamonds and as cold, but which could become luminous with tenderness or fiery with passion, as occasion required. To those whom she sought to entertain she could be extremely charming, but to a few even of these, gifted with deeper insight than the others, it seemed that beneath that fascinating manner was a dangerous nature, a will that would brook no restraint, that never would be thwarted; and that this was, in reality, the power which dominated Fair Oaks.

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After years of mysterious seclusion, however, the beautiful home of Hugh Mainwaring, while maintaining its usual reserve towards its neighbors, had thrown open its doors to guests from across the water; and on the particular afternoon of the conference in the private offices of Mainwaring & Co., there might have been seen on one of the upper balconies of the mansion at Fair Oaks a group of five English ladies, engaged in a discussion of their first impressions regarding their host and his American home. The group consisted of Mrs. Ralph Mainwaring and her daughter Isabel; Miss Edith Thornton, the daughter of William Mainwaring Thornton and the *fiancée* of Hugh Mainwaring, Jr.; Miss Winifred Carleton, a cousin of Miss Thornton; and Mrs. Hogarth, the chaperone of the last named young ladies.

Understanding, as they did, the occasion of this their first visit to the western world, and being personally interested in the happy event so soon to be celebrated, they naturally felt great interest in their new surroundings. The young ladies were especially enthusiastic in their expressions of admiration of the house and grounds, while Mrs. Mainwaring, of even more phlegmatic temperament than her husband, remarked that it was a fine old place, really much finer than she expected to see, which was quite an admission on her part.

"It is just as lovely as it can be!" said Winifred Carleton, coming from the railing, where she had been watching the broad expanse of ocean visible in the distance, and seating herself on a divan beside her cousin. "I do think, Edith, you are the most fortunate girl in the world, and I congratulate you with all my heart."

"Thank you, Winnie," replied Miss Thornton, a pronounced blonde like her father, with large, childlike blue eyes; "but it will be yours to enjoy as much as mine, for

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you will always be with me; at least, till you are married, you know."

"That is a very reckless declaration on your part, for I am likely never to marry," responded Miss Carleton, lightly. She was an orphan and an heiress, but had a home in the family of William Mainwaring Thornton, who was her uncle and guardian.

Isabel Mainwaring, reclining in a hammock near Miss Thornton, smiled languidly. She was tall, with dark hair and the Mainwaring cold, gray eyes. "You seem to ignore the fact," she said, "that our cousin is likely to live in the exclusive enjoyment of his home for many years to come."

"You mercenary wretch!" retorted Miss Carleton; "are you already counting the years before Mr. Mainwaring's death?"

"Isabel, I am shocked!" exclaimed Mrs. Mainwaring.

"I don't know why," replied that young lady, coolly. "I was only thinking, mamma; and one is not always accountable for one's thoughts, you know."

"But," said Miss Thornton, wonderingly, raising her large eyes, full of inquiry, to Mrs. Mainwaring, "after our cousin has announced his intention of making Hugh his heir, don't you think he will be likely to extend other invitations to visit Fair Oaks?"

"Undoubtedly, my dear," replied Mrs. Mainwaring, "there will probably be an exchange of courtesies between the two branches of the family from this time. Though I must say," she added, in a lower tone, and turning to Mrs. Hogarth, "I do not know that I, for one, will be particularly anxious to repeat my visit when this celebration is once over. So far as I can judge, there seems to be no society here. Wilson has learned from the servants that Mr. Mainwaring lives very quietly, in fact, receives no company whatever; and, I may be mistaken, but it cer-

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tainly seems to me that this Mrs. LaGrange occupies rather an anomalous position. She is here as his housekeeper, a servant, yet she entertains his guests, and her manners are anything but those of a servant."

"Why shouldn't she, mamma?" inquired Isabel, rather abruptly. "Cousin Hugh has never married,—which is a very good thing for us, by the way,—and who would help him entertain if his housekeeper did not?"

"It is not her position to which I object so much," remarked Mrs. Hogarth, quietly, "though I admit it seems rather peculiar, but there is something about her own personality that impresses me very unfavorably."

"In your opinion, then, she is not a proper person," said Mrs. Mainwaring, who was fond of jumping at conclusions; "well, I quite agree with you."

"No," said Mrs. Hogarth, with a smile, "I have not yet formed so decided an opinion as that. I am not prepared to say that she is a bad woman, but I believe she is a very dangerous woman."

"Dear Mrs. Hogarth, how mercilessly you always scatter my fancies to the winds!" exclaimed Miss Thornton; "until this moment I admired Mrs. LaGrange very much."

"I did not," said Miss Carleton, quickly; "from my first glimpse of her she has seemed to me like a malign presence about the place, a veritable serpent in this beautiful Eden!"

"Well," said Isabel Mainwaring, with a slight shrug, "I see no reason for any concern regarding Mrs. LaGrange, whatever she may be. I don't suppose she will be entailed upon Hugh with the property; and I only hope that before long we can buy back the old Mainwaring estate into our own branch of the family."

"That is just what your father intends to have done whenever the property comes into Hugh's possession,"

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replied Mrs. Mainwaring, and was about to say something further, when a musical whistle attracted the attention of the ladies, and, looking over the balcony railing, they saw Hugh Mainwaring, Jr., approaching the house, on his return from a day's fishing, accompanied by Walter La-Grange, a young sophomore, home on his vacation.

The former was a typical young Englishman, with a frank, pleasant countenance. The latter, while inheriting his mother's beauty and resembling her in a marked degree, yet betrayed in his face a weakness which indicated that, lacking ability to plan and execute for himself, he would become a ready tool to aid in carrying out the designs of others.

The ladies, having discovered the hour to be much later than they supposed, and knowing that the gentlemen would soon return from the city, speedily adjourned to their dressing-rooms to prepare for dinner.

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CHAPTER III

THE LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT OF HUGH MAINWARING

IMMEDIATELY after breakfast the following morning, Hugh Mainwaring, having excused himself to his guests, retired to his private library, in company with his secretary and Mr. Whitney, his attorney. A number of fine saddle-horses having been brought around from the stables, the young people cantered gayly down the oak-lined avenue, intent upon a morning ride, their voices echoing musically through the grounds. The elderly people, after a short chat, gradually dispersed. Mrs. Mainwaring retired to her room for her accustomed morning nap; Mrs. Hogarth sought the large library and was soon absorbed in the works of her favorite author, while Ralph Mainwaring and Mr. Thornton strolled up and down the gravelled walks, enjoying their cigars.

"This is a very good bit of property," remarked Mr. Mainwaring at length, running his eye with cold scrutiny over the mansion and grounds; "taking into consideration the stocks and bonds and various business interests that will go with it, it will make a fine windfall for the boy."

"That it will, and Hugh certainly is a lucky dog!" responded Mr. Thornton; "but you seem to have some definite knowledge regarding our cousin's finances; has he given you any idea as to what he is really worth?"

"He? Not a word." Then noting an expression of surprise on his companion's face, Mr. Mainwaring continued. "I have a number of business acquaintances on this side

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the water, and you may rest assured I have kept myself well posted as to the way things were going all these years. I have had something of this kind in view all the time."

"I might have known it," replied Mr. Thornton, with an amused smile. "I never yet saw a Mainwaring who did not understand how to feather his own nest. Well, as you say, it is a fine piece of property; but, do you know, Mainwaring, it strikes me that the old boy seems a bit anxious to get it disposed of according to his own liking as quickly as possible."

"It does look that way," the other acknowledged.

"Well, now, doesn't that seem a little peculiar, when, with no direct heirs that we know of, the property would in any case revert to your family?"

Ralph Mainwaring puffed in silence for a few moments, then removing his cigar and slowing knocking off the ashes, he replied very deliberately,—

"It is my opinion that he and that attorney of his are aware of some possible claimants, of whom we know nothing."

"That is my idea exactly," said Mr. Thornton; "and, don't you know, it has occurred to me that possibly, unknown to us, Harold Mainwaring may have left a child, whose existence is known to Hugh."

"That would cut no figure in this case," Mr. Mainwaring answered, quickly. "Even had there been a living child,—which there was not,—he could make no claim whatever, for Harold was disinherited by his father's will."

"Yes, I know the old gentleman disinherited Harold, but would his heirs have no claim?"

"Not under that will. I was present when it was read, and I remember it debarred 'both him and his heirs, forever.'"

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"Poor Harold!" said Mr. Thornton, after a moment's silence; "he was the elder son, was he not?"

"Yes, and his father's favorite. It broke the old man's heart to disinherit him. He failed rapidly after that occurred, and he never was the same towards Hugh. I always thought that accounted for Hugh's selling the old place as he did; it had too many unpleasant memories."

"Harold died soon after that unfortunate marriage, I believe."

"Yes; he learned too late the character of the woman he had married, and after the death of their only child, he left her, and a few years later was lost at sea."

"Well," continued Mr. Thornton, after a pause, "have you the remotest idea as to who these possible claimants against the property may be?"

"Only the merest suspicion, as yet too vague even to mention; but I think a day or two will probably enable me to determine whether I am correct or not."

At that moment, Harry Scott, the private secretary, appeared, with a message to the gentlemen from Hugh Mainwaring, to the effect that he would like to have them join himself and Mr. Whitney in his library.

As they passed around to the southern entrance with the secretary, they did not observe a closed carriage coming swiftly up the driveway, nor a tall, slender man, with cadaverous features and sharp, peering eyes, who alighted and hastily rang for admittance. But two hours later, as Mr. Thornton was descending the winding stairway in the main hall, he caught a glimpse of the strange caller, just taking his departure. The stranger, hearing footsteps, turned towards Mr. Thornton, and for an instant their eyes met. There was a mutual recognition; astonishment and scorn were written on Mr. Thornton's face, while the

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stranger cowed visibly and, with a fawning, cringing bow, made as speedy an exit as possible.

At luncheon that day both Hugh Mainwaring and a number of his guests seemed rather preoccupied, and the meal passed in unusual silence. Mrs. LaGrange exerted herself to be particularly entertaining to Mr. Whitney, but he, though courteously responding to her overtures, made no effort to continue the conversation. Even the genial Mr. Thornton was in so abstracted a mood that his daughter at last rallied him on his appearance, whereupon he turned somewhat abruptly to his host with the inquiry,—

"Are you personally acquainted with Richard Hobson?"

For an instant, Hugh Mainwaring seemed confused, and Mr. Whitney, always on the alert, noted a peculiar expression flash across the face of Mrs. LaGrange, and was also conscious of an almost imperceptible start on the part of the young secretary seated near him.

Mr. Mainwaring quickly recovered himself and replied, deliberately, "Richard Hobson, the attorney? I believe I met him once or twice, years ago, in London, but I cannot claim any acquaintance with him."

"Dick Hobson does not deserve the name of attorney," remarked Ralph Mainwaring; "he is a shyster and a scoundrel."

"He certainly bears a hard reputation," rejoined Mr. Thornton; "and I would not have mentioned his name, only that I met him here about half an hour since, and that caused me to make the inquiry I did."

Hugh Mainwaring paled visibly, though he remained calm. "Met him here, in my house? Impossible!" he exclaimed, at the same time glancing towards the butler, but the face of that functionary was as immobile as rock. "I did not suppose the man was in this country!"

"Oh, yes," replied Ralph Mainwaring; "he left Eng-

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land about two years ago; he played one too many of his dirty games there and took the first steamer for America, hoping, I suppose, to find a wider sphere of action in this country."

"Possibly I may have been mistaken," remarked Mr. Thornton, quietly, realizing that he had unconsciously touched an unpleasant chord, "but the resemblance was certainly striking."

An awkward silence followed, broken by young Scott, who excused himself on the plea of important work and returned to Mr. Mainwaring's library, where he was soon joined by all the gentlemen excepting young Mainwaring. In the hall, Hugh Mainwaring paused for a few words with the butler, and the attorney, passing at that moment, caught the man's reply, given in a low tone,—

"No, sir; Mrs. LaGrange."

A little later, the last will and testament of Hugh Mainwaring was signed by the testator, and duly attested by Ralph Mainwaring, William Mainwaring Thornton, and William H. Whitney. As the last signature was completed, Hugh Mainwaring drew a heavy sigh, saying in a low tone,—

"That is as I wished, my namesake is my heir;" then taking the document, he placed it in the hands of his secretary, adding, "Lay this for the present on my desk. To-morrow I wish it to be read in the presence of all the members of the family, after which, Mr. Whitney, I desire to have it put in your possession for safe keeping until it is needed; when that will be, no one can say;—it may be sooner than we think."

A marked change had come over his manner since luncheon, and his tones, even more than his words, made a deep impression on the mind of every one present. The shade of melancholy passed, however, and, ringing the

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bell, Hugh Mainwaring ordered carriages for himself and his guests for the afternoon and departed, leaving his secretary to attend to some private work in the library.

Harry Scott's manner, upon finding himself alone within the private rooms of Hugh Mainwaring, betrayed intense excitement. He pushed his work impatiently from him and, rising, began to walk swiftly, though noiselessly, back and forth, the entire length of the two apartments. Twice he paused before the large desk, and taking therefrom the will, already familiar to him, read its contents with burning eyes while his face alternately flushed and paled. Then folding and replacing the document, he turned towards the safe, muttering,—

"It is no use. I have searched there once before and could find nothing."

Suddenly he exclaimed, "No one knows what may happen; this may be my last opportunity! I will search once more and leave not a corner unexplored."

Having locked the library, he returned to the safe. He knew the combination, and soon the great doors swung open, revealing the contents arranged with the precision for which Mr. Mainwaring was noted in his business habits. Conscious that he had abundance of time for the work he had undertaken and that he was secure from interruption, he began a careful and methodical search through all the compartments. Various private documents were examined and then replaced in exactly their original position, but all seemed of no avail. He discovered no trace of that which he hoped to find.

At last he came to a metallic box, which he surmised, from its weight and general appearance, contained the old family jewels. Should he open that? A moment's thought decided the question; he would leave nothing unexplored. Further search revealed the key concealed in a

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tiny drawer. He applied it to the lock; the cover flew backward, and a dazzling light flashed into his face as a ray of sunlight fell across his shoulder upon the superb gems, gleaming and scintillating from the depths of their hiding-place. But he paid little heed to them, for, in a long and narrow receptacle within one side of the box, his keen eye had discovered a paper, yellow and musty with age, the sight of which thrilled him with hope. He quickly drew it forth, and a single glance at its title assured him it was indeed the object of his search. With a low cry of joy, he locked and replaced the metallic box, and, opening the ancient document, he eagerly scanned its contents, an expression of intense satisfaction overspreading his features.

He was still perusing the paper when he heard footsteps approaching the library through the long corridor, followed an instant later by a knock. Depositing the precious document safely within an inside pocket, he swung the doors of the safe together, turning the handle so as to lock it securely, and, crossing the library, unlocked and opened the door.

The butler was standing there, and, handing Scott a card, said, briefly,—

"A gentleman on private business; must see Mr. Mainwaring or his secretary at once."

Scott glanced at the card: it bore the name of "J. Henry Carruthers," with a London address, and underneath had been hastily pencilled the word "Important."

"Show the gentleman up," he said. The butler bowed and was gone, and in an incredibly short time, while yet Scott's pulse throbbed wildly from his recent discovery, the stranger entered the room.

He was a little above the average height, with a somewhat commanding presence, rather pale face, dark mous-

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tache, and black curling hair. He wore dark glasses, and was dressed in a tweed suit, slightly travel-worn, but his manners were those of a gentleman.

"Mr. Scott, I believe," he said, addressing the secretary.

"That is my name, sir; please be seated. What can I do for you, Mr. Carruthers?"

"Will you inform me, Mr. Scott, of the earliest hour at which I can see Mr. Mainwaring? I called at his city office and was directed here; but the butler states that Mr. Mainwaring is away from home, and is unable to say when he will return, or how soon he would be at liberty to see me."

"Mr. Mainwaring will probably return about five o'clock; but it is rather difficult for me to state when you could see him, as he is entertaining a number of guests, and it is doubtful if he would care to attend to any business just at this time, unless it were of special importance."

"My business with Mr. Mainwaring is of special importance," replied the other; "and I would be very glad if he could give me a little time to-morrow."

"Perhaps, if you would give me some intimation of its nature," Scott suggested, "Mr. Mainwaring might consent to make an appointment for the following day. I hardly think he would see you sooner. To-morrow is his birthday, and, as it is to be celebrated by him and his guests, it is doubtful whether he would attend to any business on that day."

"Indeed!" said Mr. Carruthers, rising, while Scott was conscious of a peculiar scrutiny fixed upon himself from behind those dark glasses; "it had escaped my mind, but now I recall that Mr. Mainwaring is to celebrate his birthday by making his young English cousin and namesake his heir. I certainly would not intrude at a time so inopportune."

The secretary started. "I was not aware that Mr. Mainwaring's intentions were generally known," he remarked.

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"Perhaps not," replied the other, in a peculiar tone. "I merely heard it mentioned, and all parties have my congratulations and best wishes. Kindly say to Mr. Mainwaring that when the happy event is over I hope he will give me his earliest consideration. My address for the present will be the Arlington House. Do not take the trouble to ring, I can find my way."

"You will find this way much shorter, sir," Scott replied, opening the door into the southern hall. Mr. Carruthers thanked him and, with a profound bow, took his departure.

As the hour was late, Scott found it necessary to devote himself at once to his work, and he had but just completed it when the sound of wheels was heard outside, and a few moments later his employer entered the room.

The latter studied Mr. Carruthers's card quite attentively, and frowned upon learning that his intentions regarding the making of his will had become known by outsiders, but he soon seemed to forget the occurrence. Soon all were gathered about the dinner-table, and the evening passed very pleasantly.

When, at a late hour, Hugh Mainwaring, in the dimly-lighted veranda, bade his guests good-night, he grasped the hand of his namesake and said, in a tone remarkably tender,—

"Hugh, my boy, the distance is long between the twenty-first and the fiftieth mile-stones on the journey of life. Heaven grant, when you shall have reached the latter, you may look back over a brighter pathway than I do to-night!"

Then, as the young man passed, he murmured to himself, "If I could but have had just such a son as he!"

He did not see, though there was one who did, a woman's form glide away in the dim light, her eyes gleaming with malignant fire.

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CHAPTER IV

A TERRIBLE AWAKENING

For some time after his guests had retired, Hugh Mainwaring remained outside, walking up and down in the starlight, apparently absorbed in thought. When at length he passed into the house, he met his secretary coming out for a solitary smoke.

"Come to my library, Mr. Scott, before you retire for the night," said Mr. Mainwaring.

"At once, sir, if you wish," the secretary replied.

"No, there is no hurry; any time within an hour," and he passed up-stairs.

Half an hour later Harry Scott passed down the corridor towards the library, but paused on hearing an angry voice within, which he at once recognized as Mrs. La-Grange's.

"Where would you be to-night?" she cried, "where would you have been all these years, if I had but exposed your dishonesty and duplicity? You defrauded your only brother during his lifetime; you have persistently ignored your son, your own flesh and blood; and now you would rob him, not only of his father's name, but of his father's fortune,—cast him off with a mere pittance,—and put this stranger in the place which is rightfully his, and wish that you had been given such a son as he! You are in my power, and you know it only too well; and I will make you and your high-born, purse-proud family rue this day's work."

Hugh Mainwaring's reply to this tirade was inaudible,

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and Scott, feeling that he already had heard too much, withdrew, and continued walking up and down the halls until the library door opened and Mrs. LaGrange came out. She swept past him in a towering rage, seeming scarcely aware of his presence until, as he passed down the corridor and entered the library, he was suddenly conscious that she had turned and was watching him.

He found Mr. Mainwaring looking pale and fatigued.

"I will detain you but a moment, Mr. Scott," he said, speaking wearily; "I have a few instructions I would like you to carry out early in the morning; and I also want to say that I wish you to consider yourself as one of my guests to-morrow, and join with us in the festivities of the occasion."

Scott thanked his employer courteously, though there might have been detected a shade of reserve in his manner, and, after receiving brief directions for the following day, withdrew.

He went to his room, but not to sleep. His mind was too full of the events of the day just passed, as well as of the expected events of the morrow. His thoughts reverted to his discovery of the afternoon, and, taking the shabby document from his pocket, he read and re-read it carefully, his features betraying deep emotion. What should be done with it? Should he let his employer know at once of the proof which he now held against him? Or should he hold it for a few days and await developments?

It was nearly three o'clock when he was aroused from his abstraction by a slight sound, as of stealthy footsteps in the rear of the house. He listened intently for a moment, but hearing nothing further and discovering the lateness of the hour, he hastily extinguished the light and, too exhausted and weary to undress, threw himself as he was upon a couch and was soon sleeping heavily.

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The sun was shining brightly into his room, when Harry Scott was awakened the next morning by a woman's scream, followed by cries and sobs and a confused sound of running to and fro. Almost before he could collect his thoughts, he heard steps approaching his room, and, rising, hastily exchanged the smoking-jacket in which he had slept for a coat. He had barely time to make the change when there was a loud knock, and some one called his name in quick, sharp tones.

Opening the door, he saw Mr. Whitney standing before him, while in the background servants were running in different directions, wringing their hands and moaning and crying hysterically.

"Mr. Scott," said the attorney, in tones trembling with excitement, "come to the tower-room at once; Mr. Mainwaring has been murdered!"

"Mr. Mainwaring murdered!" he exclaimed, reeling for an instant as if from a blow. "Great heavens! it cannot be possible!"

"It is terrible, but a fact, nevertheless," replied Mr. Whitney; "he was murdered last night in his private rooms."

"How and when was it discovered?" Scott inquired, his mind still dazed by the wild torrent of thought surging through his brain as he recalled the events of the previous night.

"Hardy, his valet, was the first to discover it this morning. We have telephoned for his physician and for the coroner; they will be out on the next train from the city."

Harry Scott shuddered as he entered the familiar room where he had taken leave of his employer but comparatively few hours before. Even amid the confusion, he noted that in the outer room everything appeared the same

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as when he last saw it, but the portières at the farther side, pushed widely open, revealed a ghastly sight.

Upon the floor, about half-way between the desk and safe, his head resting in a small pool of blood, lay Hugh Mainwaring. He was inclined slightly towards his right side, his arm partially extended, and on the floor, near his right hand, lay a revolver, while an ugly wound just above the right eye and near the temple showed where the weapon had done its deadly work. The closely cut hair about the temple was singed and his face was blackened, showing that the fatal shot had been fired at close range. There were no indications, however, of a struggle of any kind; the great revolving-chair, usually standing in front of the desk, had been pushed aside, but everything else was in its accustomed place, and the desk was closed and locked.

Ralph Mainwaring was already kneeling beside the body; Mr. Thornton and young Mainwaring, who had entered immediately after Scott and the attorney, stood speechless with horror. With what conflicting emotions the young secretary gazed upon the lifeless form of his employer, fortunately for him at that moment, no one knew; as his mind cleared, he began to realize that his position was likely to prove a difficult and dangerous one, and that he must act with extreme caution.

The silence was first broken by Mr. Thornton, who exclaimed,—

"Terrible! Terrible! What do you think, Mainwaring? is this murder or suicide?"

"Time alone will tell," replied Mr. Mainwaring in a low tone; "but I am inclined to think it is murder."

"Murder without a doubt!" added Mr. Whitney.

"But who could have done such a deed?" groaned Mr. Thornton.

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Hugh Mainwaring was attired, as when Scott had last seen him, in a rich dressing-gown; but as the secretary knelt beside the silent form and touched the left hand lying partially hidden in its folds, he gave a slight start, and, quickly passing his hand within the dressing-gown, announced in a low tone,—

"His diamond ring and his watch are both gone!"

"Robbery!" exclaimed young Mainwaring; "that must have been the object of the murderer!" while his father, glancing towards the safe, remarked,—

"We must ascertain whether anything else is missing."

"We will make a thorough examination of the room after the coroner's arrival," said Mr. Whitney, "but, for the present, everything must remain as it is."

"Should we not send for a detective at once?" Mr. Thornton inquired.

"I have already telephoned for one upon my own responsibility," replied the attorney.

"When were you last in these rooms, Mr. Scott?" asked Ralph Mainwaring of the secretary, who had risen to his feet and was making a careful survey of the room.

"About twelve o'clock last night, sir," was his reply; then noting a look of surprise on the faces about him, he added,—

"I came at Mr. Mainwaring's request, as he wished to give directions regarding some work to be done this morning."

"He was alone at that time?"

"Yes, sir."

"How did he appear?" inquired Mr. Thornton.

"The same as usual, except that he seemed very weary."

"Was he in this room?" asked Mr. Mainwaring.

"No, sir; he was seated in the library."

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A TERRIBLE AWAKENING

The sound of voices in the corridor attracted Mr. Mainwaring's attention, and he turned quickly to his son,—

"Hugh, I hear your mother's voice; go and meet her. The ladies must not be allowed to come in here."

Mr. Thornton turned to accompany young Mainwaring. Near the door he met his daughter and Miss Carleton, while a little farther down the corridor were Isabel Mainwaring and her mother. With terror-stricken faces they gathered about him, unable to believe the terrible report which they had learned from the servants. As best he could, he answered their numerous inquiries, and, having escorted them to another part of the house, left them in charge of young Mainwaring, while he returned to the library.

Meanwhile, the news of the murder had spread with lightning-like rapidity, and already crowds of people, drawn by that strange fascination which always exists for a certain class in scenes of this kind, were gathering on the grounds outside the house, forming in little groups, conversing with the servants, or gazing upward with awe-stricken glances at the closely-drawn shutters of the room in the tower. The invisible barriers which so long had excluded the public from Fair Oaks had been swept away by the hand of death, and rich and poor, capitalist and laborer, alike wandered unrestrained up and down the oak-lined avenue.

At the door of the library, Mr. Thornton found Ralph Mainwaring and the attorney conversing together in low tones.

"Yes," Mr. Mainwaring was saying, "as you say, it is undoubtedly murder; but I confess I am at a loss to understand the motive for such a deed, unless it were robbery; and you do not seem to give that idea much credence?"

Mr. Whitney shook his head decidedly. "Unless we

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find very strong evidence in that direction, I cannot believe that this is any case of common robbery.''

"But to what other motive would you attribute it?'' inquired Mr. Mainwaring.

"Until further facts have been developed which may throw light upon the subject, I do not feel prepared to say what the motive might have been.''

"You evidently have your suspicions,'' remarked Mr. Mainwaring, while Mr. Thornton inquired,—

"Had our cousin any enemies that you know of?''

Mr. Whitney turned a keen, penetrating glance upon Mr. Thornton for an instant, and the latter continued,—

"I thought it possible that in his business relations he might have incurred the enmity of some one of whom you knew.''

"No,'' the attorney answered, quickly, "I am not aware of anything of that nature. Mr. Mainwaring made few intimate friends, but he was universally respected by all who knew him. If he had any enemies,'' he added, very slowly, "they were within his own household.''

Ralph Mainwaring looked sharply at the attorney, but Mr. Thornton exclaimed,—

"Egad! sir, but you surely do not think this deed was committed by any one of the inmates of this house?''

"As I have already said,'' replied Mr. Whitney, "I am not prepared to state what I do think without further knowledge of the facts in the case.''

"Of course we understand that,'' rejoined Mr. Mainwaring; "but we desire to have the benefit of your opinions and judgment regarding this case so soon as you do feel justified in expressing them, and, since you are vastly more familiar with the circumstances surrounding it than we, we wish to rely on your suggestions in this matter,''

The attorney bowed. "My advice for the present

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would be to take care that no one leaves the premises, and that you also send for Mrs. LaGrange ; I wish to see her,'' he said briefly, and passed into the library.

Ralph Mainwaring beckoned to the butler, who was standing at a little distance, awaiting orders.

"Call the housekeeper at once, Mr. Whitney wishes to see her in the library ; and send Wilson to me, and also the coachman.''

With a silent acknowledgment of the order the butler withdrew, and a moment later, John Wilson, a middle-aged man and a servant of Ralph Mainwaring's who had accompanied him from London, appeared, followed by Brown, the coachman at Fair Oaks.

Mr. Mainwaring first addressed the latter. "Brown, for the next hour or so, I wish you to be stationed in the hall below. Keep back the crowd as much as possible ; when the coroner and physician arrive show them up at once, but on no account allow any one else to come up-stairs.''

Then turning to his own serving-man, as Brown departed to the duties assigned him, Mr. Mainwaring continued,—

"For you, Wilson, I have a task which I cannot intrust to any one else, but which I know you will perform faithfully and discreetly ; so far as you are able, keep a close watch upon every one within this house, without seeming to do so ; pay close attention to all conversation which you hear, and if you hear or see anything unusual, or that seems to have any bearing on what has occurred, report to me at once. Above all, do not let any of the servants leave the premises without they have my permission.''

"Very well, sir,'' Wilson replied ; as he moved away the butler reappeared.

"The housekeeper has not yet left her room, sir,'' he said, addressing Mr. Mainwaring. "I gave the message by

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the chambermaid, and she sent word that she had been prostrated by the terrible news this morning, sir, but that she would see Mr. Whitney in a few moments.''

As the man retreated, Mr. Thornton paused suddenly in his walk up and down the corridor,—

''Pon my soul, Mainwaring! it strikes me—particularly since hearing that will read yesterday—that there must have been something with reference to that woman—well—rather peculiar, don't you know.''

"It strikes me,'' replied Mr. Mainwaring with marked emphasis, "that there may be something rather 'peculiar,' as you call it, in that direction at present, and I believe Mr. Whitney is of the same opinion.''

"How is that? You surely do not think it possible that in his mind she is in any way associated with this murder—if it is a murder?''

"He evidently suspects some one in this house, and for the present we can draw our own inferences. Regarding those provisions in the will to which you just now alluded, I can assure you I was not too well pleased; but I knew it was useless to raise any objections or questions; to my mind, however, they furnish a clue as to the possible claimants against the estate, which we were discussing yesterday, and perhaps a clue to this latest development, also.''

"By my soul! it looks like it; but surely she could have no valid claim.''

"Valid or not,'' replied Ralph Mainwaring, "there must have been a powerful claim of some kind. When a man of Hugh Mainwaring's type leaves a handsome annuity to his housekeeper, and an interest in his business wor'h fifty or seventy-five thousand to her son, it may be considered pretty strong evidence that——''

At a warning glance from Mr. Thornton, Ralph Main-

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waring paused abruptly and, turning, saw Mrs. LaGrange coming noiselessly down the corridor. She was dressed with even more than usual care, with quantities of rich lace fastened loosely about her shapely neck and falling in profusion over her beautifully moulded wrists and hands. Her dark, handsome features bore no trace of recent prostration, but betrayed, instead, signs of intense excitement. She bowed silently and passed onward, entering the library so quietly that the attorney, absorbed in thought, was unaware of her presence until she stood before him. He started slightly, and for an instant neither spoke. Each was silently gauging the power of the other.

For some time, Mrs. LaGrange had been conscious that Mr. Whitney was one of the few whose penetration could not be blinded by her blandishments. In addition, the fact that he was the private solicitor and legal adviser of Hugh Mainwaring did not tend to inspire her with confidence regarding his attitude towards herself. Nevertheless, he was an eminent attorney and this was a critical moment; if she could gain his favor and his services in her behalf, it would be a brilliant stroke of policy. Her plans were well laid, and she was prepared to assume whatever *rôle* was necessary, so soon as his words or manner should give her the desired cue.

For this, she did not have long to wait; one searching glance, and she had read in the piercing scrutiny and cold scorn of his keen blue eye that, so far from winning favor from him, he would prove her most bitter opponent, and as quickly she determined upon her future course of action.

Mr. Whitney, on the other hand, though a frequent visitor at Fair Oaks, and familiar with the fascinating manner with which, when she chose, Mrs. LaGrange entertained the guests of Hugh Mainwaring, was now forced to acknowledge to himself that never had he seen

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this handsome woman so beautiful as at the present moment. The eyes looking into his with such depth of meaning,—the expression, the attitude,—all were utterly unlike anything which he had ever seen; but his face grew only the more stern, for the thought then and there occurred to him that perhaps here was the solution of the mysterious power which this woman had wielded over the man whose lifeless form was now lying in their presence.

He observed that the luminous eyes grew suddenly cold, while her head assumed its usual haughty poise; the brief spell was over, and each understood the other.

After a few general directions, Mr. Whitney remarked, "This day's events will be far different from what we had anticipated."

"Yes," she replied, with a mocking smile, "in that it brings to the guests of this house, instead of future expectations, the immediate realization of their wishes!"

"It is not to be conceived for one moment that any of them take that view of what has occurred," he replied, in a tone of displeasure.

"Possibly not," she rejoined, "although the prospective long life of their host seemed to greatly detract, at least in the case of one of their number, from their enjoyment of the occasion which they had come to celebrate."

"To whom do you refer?" he inquired.

"It is unnecessary to give names," she answered, coldly; "but had the Mainwarings of London known the facts which I know, they would never have crossed the water to take part in the farce which was enacted here yesterday. There are Mainwarings with better right and title to this estate than they, as they will soon learn."

Neither by look nor gesture did she manifest the least consciousness of, or concern for, the inanimate form visible

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in the adjoining room. With sudden directness, and ignoring the implied threat in her last words, Mr. Whitney asked,—

"Mrs. LaGrange, at what hour did you last see Hugh Mainwaring?"

She was about to reply, when Scott entered from the tower-room. He had heard her last remark, and his dark, piercing eyes were fixed upon her face in keen scrutiny. She was quick to note the fact and hesitated an instant, while a change, inexplicable to the attorney, passed over her face,—surprise, a shade almost of fear, and haughty defiance were visible in quick succession; then, turning again towards Mr. Whitney, she answered, indifferently,—

"It was quite late last night; I do not recollect the hour."

As the attorney was about to speak, Mr. Thornton appeared at the door of the library.

"Beg pardon, Mr. Whitney, but I believe the coroner and others have arrived; as you know the gentlemen, will you kindly meet them?"

"Certainly. Mr. Scott, you will please remain here," and the attorney hastened out into the corridor.

Again Mrs. LaGrange and the secretary faced each other in silence, each apparently trying to read the other's thoughts and probe the depth of the other's knowledge; then, as the gentlemen were heard approaching, she withdrew, leaving him alone.

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CHAPTER V

IMPORTANT DISCOVERIES

As the attorney, in response to the summons from Mr. Thornton, hastened from the corridor into the main hall, five gentlemen were slowly ascending the broad stairway, conversing together in subdued tones. One, younger than the others and evidently more familiar with the surroundings at Fair Oaks, stepped quickly in advance of the rest and extended his hand to Mr. Whitney in silent greeting. This was Dr. Hobart, Hugh Mainwaring's physician and one of his most intimate friends, although a number of years his junior. Following him were Mr. Elliott and Mr. Chittenden, of the firm of Mainwaring & Co., while bringing up the rear were the coroner and a gentleman, somewhat below medium size and of modest appearance, whom the attorney greeted very cordially and afterwards introduced to Mr. Thornton as Mr. Merrick. Proceeding at once to the library, they were joined a moment later by Ralph Mainwaring and his son. The necessary introductions followed, and Mr. Mainwaring having given the butler instructions to admit no one into the library, Mr. Whitney made a brief statement regarding the discovery of the murder, and all passed into the room in the tower.

Dr. Hobart at once bent over the prostrate form with genuine sorrow. The millionaire broker had been one of his earliest patrons, and their acquaintance had soon ripened into a mutual attachment, notwithstanding the disparity in their ages. After a long look at the face of his friend, he gave place to the coroner, who was also a physician. They

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partially lifted the body and both examined the wound, the small man who had accompanied the coroner looking on silently. It was found that the bullet had entered just above the right eye and had passed through the brain in a slightly downward direction, coming out near the base upon the same side. The most careful search failed to disclose the bullet, and attention was next directed to the revolver lying upon the floor near the right hand. It was a Smith & Wesson, thirty-two calibre, with but one empty chamber, that from which the fatal bullet had probably been discharged.

"Can any of you gentlemen tell me whether or not this belonged to the deceased?" inquired the coroner, holding up the revolver.

There was an instant's pause, and Mr. Whitney replied, "I know that Mr. Mainwaring owned a revolver, but, having never seen it, am unable to answer your inquiry. Perhaps his secretary could give you the desired information."

"I have often seen a revolver lying in Mr. Mainwaring's desk," said the secretary; "but I doubt whether I could identify it, as I never observed it closely. I should judge, however, that this was the same size and make."

"Would it not be well to see if it is still there?" suggested the attorney. "I suppose you have a key to the desk."

"I have, sir," he replied, at the same time producing it. Crossing the room, he unlocked and opened the desk. An instant later, he announced, as he closed the desk, "It is not here."

There was a subdued murmur, and Mr. Thornton was heard to exclaim, "Suicide! That has been my impression all along."

Ralph Mainwaring glanced inquiringly at the attorney,

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who shook his head emphatically, while the coroner once more inspected the wound with an air of perplexity.

"Doctor," inquired Ralph Mainwaring, "in your opinion, how long has life been extinct?"

"I should judge about eight or nine hours," replied Dr. Hobart. "What would you say, Dr. Westlake?"

"That would be my judgment, also."

"You would say that death was instantaneous?" questioned the attorney.

"Without a doubt. It could not have been otherwise."

Ralph Mainwaring consulted his watch. "It is now half after nine; in your judgment, then, this must have occurred about one o'clock this morning?"

"About that time."

"At what hour was Mr. Mainwaring last seen by any one in this house?" asked the coroner.

"As nearly as we have ascertained thus far, at about twelve o'clock."

"Twelve? Indeed! By whom? and where?"

"By his private secretary, and in the library adjoining."

"Very well," said the coroner, after a pause, during which he had made a memorandum of certain details which he considered of special importance; "the undertaker can now be summoned, as I believe he is waiting below, and we seem to have ascertained all the facts possible in this direction; and, Mr. Whitney, I will next see the valet, whom you say was the one to discover the situation this morning."

In the slight confusion and delay which ensued, Mr. Elliott and Mr. Chittenden took their departure, with the usual expressions of condolence and regret, followed a few moments later by Dr. Hobart, who was accompanied downstairs by young Mainwaring.

Meanwhile, Mr. Merrick, having made a close scrutiny

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of the lifeless form, had been slowly walking back and forth in the tower-room and library, his hands in the pockets of his short sacque coat and his eyes apparently riveted on the floor. Several times in the library he paused and, bending downward, seemed to be intently studying the carpet; then, after two or three turns about the room, he sauntered towards the windows and doors, examining the fastenings of each in turn, and, on reaching the door opening into the southern hall, suddenly disappeared.

"A very mysterious case!" commented the coroner, when he had finished his interview with the valet. "Thus far nothing can be learned which throws much actual light on the subject one way or another, but if anybody can unravel the mystery, Merrick can."

"Merrick!" repeated Mr. Thornton, turning to Mr. Whitney in surprise. "Is Mr. Merrick a detective?"

"He is. I did not introduce him as such, for the reason that in a case of this kind he usually prefers to make his first visit incognito if possible."

"Very well; you have taken the responsibility in this matter. You understand, of course, Mr. Whitney, that we want no amateur work in a case like this."

"Mr. Merrick is no amateur," said the attorney, quietly; "he is one of the most trusted and one of the surest men on the force."

"Before we go any farther," interposed Ralph Mainwaring, "I suggest that we ascertain whether or not there has been a robbery. We can at least satisfy ourselves on that point."

"Acting on your suggestion, we will examine the safe," said Mr. Whitney; "though I, for one, am not inclined to think there has been any robbery. Without a knowledge of the combination, the safe could not be opened

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unless force were employed; and it certainly bears no evidence of having been tampered with."

"Proceed with your investigation, Mr. Whitney," said the quiet voice of the detective, who had entered unobserved from the smoking-room; "unless I am greatly mistaken, the person we are after is some one pretty familiar with various 'combinations' in these apartments."

There was a general expression of surprise, and all turned towards Mr. Merrick for an explanation, but a glance at his impassive face convinced them that questions would be useless.

With a few swift turns the secretary unlocked the safe and the ponderous doors swung open, showing books and papers in their accustomed places. Everything appeared in perfect order; but as the attorney began a rapid examination of thc interior, he suddenly uttered a sharp exclamation, while, as he continued his search, his manner betrayed considerable excitement.

"Anything wrong, Mr. Whitney? anything missing?" queried Ralph Mainwaring.

"Everything is missing!" the other exclaimed, after a moment's pause, turning around with a pale face and holding in his hand an empty cash box; "there is absolutely nothing left but an old cheque-book, a few drafts, and some other papers of no value whatever except to Hugh Mainwaring himself!"

Half a score of questions were instantly raised: "Was there a large amount of money in the safe?" "Did it contain anything of great value?"

Scott, standing silently in the background, seemed to see again the brilliant gems flashing in the sunlight, as he had seen them in his search on the preceding day, but he said nothing.

"There was a considerable amount of cash," the attorney

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was saying. "Mr. Mainwaring deposited a large sum there when he last came out from the city, and," he added more slowly, "the old family jewels were kept in the safe."

"The Mainwaring jewels!" echoed both the Englishmen. "Impossible! incredible!" While Ralph Mainwaring exclaimed, "Why, they were worth a fortune several times over in themselves!"

"I am aware of that," answered the attorney. "I often remonstrated with Mr. Mainwaring, but to no purpose; for some reason which he never explained he always kept them there."

"I would never have believed him capable of such recklessness," said Mr. Thornton.

"Recklessness!" exclaimed Ralph Mainwaring; "it was the biggest piece of imbecility I ever heard of! What is your opinion now, Mr. Whitney, regarding a robbery in connection with this case?"

"That there has been a robbery I am forced to admit," the attorney replied, courteously but firmly; "but my opinion of the matter is still unchanged. I regard the robbery as only incident to the murder. I do not yet believe it to have led to the deeper crime."

"Do you know, Mr. Scott, whether any one beside yourself understood the combination of the safe?" Ralph Mainwaring inquired.

"I do not, sir," the secretary replied, conscious that all eyes had turned upon him at the inquiry and that the detective was observing him closely.

Meanwhile Ralph Mainwaring loudly lamented the missing jewels, until it was evident to all that their loss, for the time at least, had completely overshadowed all thought of the tragedy they were investigating.

"They must be recovered at all hazards and at any price," he said, addressing the detective. "There were

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single gems in that collection which cost a fortune and which have been heirlooms in the family for generations."

After further search which failed to disclose anything of importance, or any clue regarding either the murder or the robbery, arrangements were made for the inquest to be held at three o'clock that afternoon, and the party was about to leave the apartments, when Mr. Whitney paused.

"One moment, gentlemen; there is one more point I would like investigated. I maintain that we have not yet discovered the most essential clue to this case—something to throw light on the possible motive which prompted the murder of Hugh Mainwaring. I now wish to make a final trial. Mr. Scott, will you once more open Mr. Mainwaring's desk for us and take out the will that was deposited there yesterday?"

Ralph Mainwaring started. "The will? You surely do not think——"

"I think it might be safer in our own possession," said the attorney, with a peculiar smile.

"And right you are!" added Mr. Thornton, approvingly. "I wonder you had not thought of that yourself, Mainwaring."

Meanwhile, Scott, having opened the desk in compliance with the attorney's request, had looked for the will where he had last seen it on the preceding day, and, failing to find it, was searching through the numerous receptacles containing Mr. Mainwaring's private papers. The silence around him became oppressive, and suddenly looking up, he encountered the glance of both Mr. Whitney and the detective, the former with an expression of triumph in his keen eyes. Perplexed and bewildered, Scott exclaimed in a mechanical tone,—

"The will is gone; it is nowhere to be found!"

"I thought as much," said the attorney, quietly.

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CHAPTER VI

THE INQUEST

THE crowd, which early in the day had gathered about Fair Oaks, instead of diminishing, seemed rather to increase as the hours slipped away. Little by little the facts became known to outsiders,—the loss of the old family jewels, concerning whose existence and probable value vague rumors had been circulated in the past, the drawing up of the will on the preceding day and its strange disappearance in connection with the sudden and mysterious death of the testator,—all combined to arouse public interest and curiosity to an unusual degree; it seemed the culmination of the impenetrable mystery which for years had shrouded the place.

As the hour for the inquest approached, the crowd was augmented by each suburban train, until a throng of business men of all classes, interspersed with numerous reporters eager for the details of the affair, covered the grounds and even sought admittance to the house, for the millionaire broker, though a man of few intimate friendships, was widely known and honored in the financial and commercial world.

Shortly after the arrival of the 2.45 train from the city, the Mainwaring carriage came rapidly up the avenue, two or three other carriages following in the rear. As it stopped, Mr. Whitney alighted, followed by an elderly gentleman of fine appearance and two officers of the special police, who immediately began to force back the crowd, while the attorney and his companion hastily entered the house and

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were met by the butler, who, in response to a hurried inquiry, directed them up-stairs.

In the private library they found the detective who had been left there alone at his own request. There was a brief interview between the three, after which Mr. Whitney begged his companion to excuse him for a moment, and beckoning Mr. Merrick into the tower-room, asked eagerly,—

"Well, what success? Have you struck the trail?"

With an enigmatical smile, the detective replied, "The game has doubled back on the trail pretty adroitly, but I have made one or two little discoveries that may be of value later. What do you think of this?"

Opening a small note-book, he took therefrom several pieces of burnt paper, most of which were so blackened that the faint traces of writing which they bore were illegible. On a few pieces, however, words and parts of words could be distinctly read.

Mr. Whitney studied the bits of discolored paper for a moment, and then exclaimed in excited tones,—

"Good heavens, man! it is the will! The will drawn up in these rooms yesterday! See, here is the date, 'this seventh day of July, in the year of our'—the rest is gone."

"Here is part of a name," said the detective, "'nor Houghton LaGra'——"

"Eleanor Houghton LaGrange!" exclaimed the attorney; "and below you can just trace the words, 'this amount of annuity to be'; and here are other bits, 'as to my estate and all property,' 'to hold the same forever, together with.' Well, I should say these were of value; where did you find them?"

For answer, Mr. Merrick pointed to a small fireplace behind the safe, near which a large screen was standing.

"Strange!" exclaimed the attorney. "I never noticed that before, much as I have been here."

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"It escaped my observation for some time," replied the other. "I searched the fireplace in the library, but this grate is very small and was concealed by that large screen, as well as by the safe. Evidently, it was seldom used, and was selected for that reason by whoever destroyed the will, as more likely to escape notice."

"Rather a bungling piece of work," commented the attorney, "leaving these partially burned scraps. I wonder that he or she, whoever it was, did not make sure that they were entirely consumed."

"The person may have heard some sound and, fearing detection, hastened away before the job was completed," suggested the other.

"Well, it is past three, we must hasten; you found nothing more?"

"Nothing of special importance. I have learned one fact, however; the murder was never committed in this room, but in the library."

"The library! Why do you think that?"

"I do not think it, I know it, and was confident of it while we were making the examination this morning. Say nothing about it, however, for the present. We will go now, if you are ready."

Joining the gentleman still awaiting them in the library, they descended into the lower hall, where the detective suddenly disappeared.

Meanwhile, the coroner and members of the jury, after alighting from their carriages, marched gravely up the broad stairs and were conducted by a servant into one of the private apartments where lay the body of the murdered man. Under the direction of Dr. Westlake, the jury individually viewed the wounds, noting their location and character, and, after a brief visit to the room in the tower, all passed downstairs and were shown into the large library on the first floor.

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The coroner occupied a large arm-chair at one end of a long writing-table in the centre of the room, the jury being seated together near his left, while on each side of the table chairs had been placed for the accommodation of a few of the more prominent reporters, the others, less favored, stationing themselves at the doorways and open windows.

In the room back of the library were the servants, the women grouped about the great arched doorway with white, frightened faces, the men standing a little farther in the rear, while in a dim corner, partially concealed by the heavy portières and unseen by any one excepting the servants, was the detective.

When everything was in readiness, Mr. Whitney entered the room with the gentleman who had accompanied him out from the city and followed by the London guests. In the lead were Ralph Mainwaring and his son, the entrance of the latter causing a small stir of interest and excitement, as a score of pencils at once began to rapidly sketch the features of the young Englishman, the intended heir of Hugh Mainwaring. The young man's face wore an expression of unconcern, but his father's features were set and severe. To him, the loss of the will meant something more than the forfeiture of the exclusive ownership of a valuable estate; it meant the overthrow and demolition of one of his pet schemes, cherished for twenty-one years, just on the eve of its fulfilment; and those who knew Ralph Mainwaring knew that to thwart his plans was a dangerous undertaking.

Mr. Thornton followed, escorting Mrs. Mainwaring and her daughter, the cold, gray eyes of Isabel Mainwaring flashing a look of haughty disdain on the faces about her. Bringing up the rear was Mrs. Hogarth with her two charges, Edith Thornton and Winifred Carleton, the face

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of the latter lighted with an intelligent, sympathetic interest in her surroundings.

Harry Scott next entered, pausing in the doorway for an instant, while just behind him appeared Mrs. LaGrange. The room was already crowded, and Miss Carleton, seated near the door, with a quick glance invited the young secretary to a vacant chair by her side, which he gracefully accepted, but not before a tiny note had been thrust into his hand, unseen by any one excepting the detective.

Pale, but with all her accustomed hauteur, Mrs. LaGrange, accompanied by her son, passed slowly around the group of reporters, ignoring the chair offered by the attorney, and seated herself in a position as remote as possible from the guests of the house and commanding a full view of the servants. Her gown was noticeable for its elegance, and her jewelled hands toyed daintily with a superb fan, from whose waving black plumes a perfume, subtle and exquisite, was wafted to every part of the room.

In the silence that followed, the coroner, with a few brief words, called for the first witness, George Hardy. A young man, with a frank face and quiet, unassuming manner, stepped forward from the group of servants. After the usual preliminaries, the coroner inquired,—

"How long have you been in the employ of Mr. Mainwaring?"

"Nearly four years, sir."

"During that time you have held the position of valet?"

"Yes, sir."

"At what time this morning did you discover what had occurred?"

"About seven o'clock, sir."

"You may state how you came to make this discovery, giving full particulars."

"I had gone as usual to the bath-room to prepare the

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bath for Mr. Mainwaring, and when everything was in readiness I knocked at his door to waken him. There was no answer, and, after knocking several times, I unlocked the door and looked in. I saw he had not occupied the room, but I didn't think much about that, and went on through the smoking-room into the library, and then I saw Mr. Mainwaring lying on the floor in the next room. At first I thought he was sick and went to him, but as I got nearer I saw that he was dead, and then I noticed the revolver lying beside him."

"What did you then do?"

"I was frightened, sir, and I went to call help as quick as I could."

"Who was the first person whom you met and told of your discovery?"

"Well, sir, I went first for Mr. Whitney, because he was a friend of Mr. Mainwaring's and a lawyer, and I thought he would know what to do; but on my way to his room I met Wilson, Mr. Ralph Mainwaring's valet, and I told him what had happened; then I called Mr. Whitney and told him Mr. Mainwaring had shot himself."

"Did you get the impression that Mr. Mainwaring had shot himself from the fact that the revolver lay near his hand, or had you any other reasons for that inference?"

"No, sir, that was the only reason."

"Can you state positively whether this revolver belonged to Mr. Mainwaring?" asked the coroner, at the same time passing the weapon to Hardy.

"Yes, sir," replied the latter, promptly, handing it back after a moment's inspection, "that is Mainwaring's revolver. I've cleaned it many a time, and there's little marks on it that I know sure."

"Very well. After summoning Mr. Whitney, did you call any other members of the household?"

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"Mr. Whitney sent me to call Mr. Ralph Mainwaring; but I met Wilson again, and he said he had just told Mr. Mainwaring and Mr. Thornton, and was on his way to the room of young Mr. Mainwaring. Down the hall I met the butler and told him what had happened, and we both went into the library, and I stayed there till Mr. Whitney came."

"When did you last see Mr. Hugh Mainwaring?"

"Shortly after dinner last evening, between seven and eight o'clock, I should say, sir."

"Where was that?"

"In the main hall down-stairs, sir. He stopped me to say that he would not need me last evening, and that after locking up his rooms for the night I could have my time to myself."

"Was the locking of his rooms usually included among your duties at night?"

"Yes, sir; his private rooms and the hall on the south side."

"Did you have any stated time for doing this?"

"At nine o'clock, sir."

"You locked the rooms as usual last night?"

"Yes, sir; that is, I locked them all right, but it was later than usual."

"How was that?"

"About half an hour after Mr. Mainwaring spoke to me, the housekeeper came and asked me to keep the rooms open till about ten o'clock, as she was expecting callers and wanted to receive them by the south hall into her private parlor."

"At what time did you lock the rooms?"

"A few minutes after ten, sir. I felt kind of uneasy, because it was Mr. Mainwaring's orders that the rooms be shut at nine; so soon as 'twas ten o'clock I went around outside, and, seeing no light in her parlor, I went in and

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locked the hall and then went up-stairs to lock the rooms there."

"Did you see any strangers about the place at that time?"

"No, sir."

"You saw no one in any of Mr. Mainwaring's private rooms?"

"No strangers, you mean? No, sir."

"Was there any one in his rooms?"

"The housekeeper was in the library. She had gone up-stairs that way, she said, and had found the door into the main hall locked, and hearing me come, she waited for me to open it."

"Had you locked the door into the main hall?"

"No, sir; that door wasn't usually locked in the evening. I don't know who locked it, but I opened it for her and then locked it again."

"Are you positive there was no one else in those rooms at that time?"

"Yes, sir, pretty sure," replied Hardy, with a smile, "for I looked them over uncommon thorough last night. I thought at first that I smelled smoke, like something burning, but I looked around careful and everything was all right."

At this point Mr. Whitney held a whispered consultation with the coroner for a moment.

"You say," continued the latter, "you thought you smelled something burning; could you state what the material seemed to be?"

"Well, sir, I thought it was like paper burning; but I must have been mistaken, for the papers on the table was all right and there was nothing in the fireplace."

"Did you see or hear anything unusual about the place at any time last night?"

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"No, sir."

For a moment the coroner was occupied with a slip of paper which had been passed to him through a number of hands; then he said,—

"Before you are dismissed, will you describe the locks used on the doors of Mr. Mainwaring's library and the south hall."

"They had the ordinary locks, sir; and then, in addition, a small, patent lock, that when a certain spring was turned the door locked of itself and could not be opened from either side unless one had the key and understood the working of the spring."

"Who had keys to fit these locks?"

"No one but Mr. Mainwaring. When he was home and wanted the doors unlocked, he hung the keys in a particular place in the library where I could find them, and when he went away he always took them with him."

"Did you unlock the library doors this morning?"

"Only the door into the main hall when I went to call Mr. Whitney,—that had nothing but an ordinary lock; but the other door, into the south hall, was unlocked and the keys gone when I first went into the library."

"One question more. Do you know whether any one else in the house had knowledge of, or access to, these particular keys?"

"I don't know for certain, sir, but I think not."

The attorney was next called upon, and came forward, while Hardy resumed his former place among the servants.

"Mr. Whitney," said the coroner, after the witness had given the details of his arrival in the tower-room in response to the valet's summons, "will you please state when, and under what circumstances, you last saw Hugh Mainwaring living."

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"At nearly eleven o'clock last night. Mr. Mainwaring had just bidden his guests good-night, and I believe they had all retired to their rooms, leaving him and myself together upon the veranda in front of the house. I remained with him about ten minutes, I should judge, talking over the events of the day which had been of unusual interest. I remember his remarking that he should not retire for an hour or so, as, to use his own expression, his thoughts would not let him sleep. We clasped hands with an exchange of good wishes. That was the last I ever saw him living or heard him speak."

Mr. Whitney's voice trembled slightly towards the close of his recital, but as he repeated Hugh Mainwaring's words a smile of scorn passed over the face of Mrs. LaGrange, who was seated directly opposite.

"Will you please state," said the coroner, "how Mr. Mainwaring had been engaged during the day, yesterday."

"Until about half-past two his time was spent in the preparation, with the assistance of his secretary and myself, and the execution of his last will and testament. The remainder of the day was devoted to the entertainment of his guests."

"Will you give briefly and in general terms the conditions of the will."

"With the exception of an annuity to his housekeeper and a handsome bequest to her son, it conveyed everything to his cousin and namesake, Hugh Mainwaring, Jr., whom he intended to-day to formally declare his heir."

"Where was this document placed, Mr. Whitney?"

"It was, at Mr. Mainwaring's request, placed by his secretary on his desk in the tower-room."

"You can give no further information regarding this will, now missing?"

"Only this," replied Mr. Whitney, with marked em-

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phasis, "that we now have positive proof that the will was burned."

There was a general movement of surprise, both among the members of the household and outsiders; and the attorney, closely observant of Mrs. LaGrange, saw her cheek, which but a moment before, at his mention of the annuity contained in the will, had flamed with anger, suddenly assume a strange pallor.

"Mr. Whitney," continued the coroner, having consulted a small memorandum which he held, "do you know whether there were any strangers at Fair Oaks yesterday?"

"I have no personal knowledge on that subject. The secretary informs me that a stranger inquired for Mr. Mainwaring in the afternoon, and remarks were made at luncheon, that impressed me considerably, regarding some one who had called in the forenoon, whether to see Mr. Mainwaring I am not prepared to state."

"Will you state the nature of those remarks?"

"I should prefer to be excused until later in this examination. For the present, I will merely say that one of Mr. Mainwaring's guests incidentally met and recognized this caller; that the latter was evidently well and unfavorably known by both Mr. Mainwaring and his guests, and, if I am not mistaken, by the secretary also, and that the mention of the man's name seemed to affect Mr. Hugh Mainwaring very unpleasantly."

"In what respect, Mr. Whitney?"

"He grew very pale and appeared confused, if not alarmed, on learning that the man was in this country and had been seen at this house, and he seemed abstracted and very unlike himself for fully an hour after the occurrence."

"Will you state the name of this man?"

"He was spoken of as Richard Hobson, formerly an attorney, of London."

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CHAPTER VII

A BATTLE ROYAL

"HARRY SCOTT, private secretary of Hugh Mainwaring," announced the coroner, when Mr. Whitney had resumed his chair.

As the young secretary walked deliberately through the crowded room, there were few who failed to remark his erect, athletic form, his splendid bearing, and especially the striking beauty of his dark face, with its olive tint, clear-cut features, indicative of firmness and strength, and large, piercing eyes, within whose depths, on the present occasion, there seemed to be, half hidden, half revealed, some smouldering fire. Instantly a half-dozen pencils were transferring to paper his form and features.

"Say, what are you 'doing' him for?" whispered one reporter to his neighbor. "He isn't anybody; only the old man's secretary."

"Can't help that," replied the other; "he's better looking than the English chap, anyhow; and, in my opinion, the old fellow would have shown better sense to have left him the 'stuff.'"

Meanwhile, young Scott, having answered a few preliminary interrogatories, turned slowly, facing Mrs. Grange, who was watching him with an intensity of manner and expression as though she would compel him to meet her gaze.

As his glance met hers, a look of inquiry flashed from her eyes to his, accompanied by an expression persuasive, almost appealing. But the only reply was an ominous flash

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from the dark eyes, as, with a gesture of proud disdain, he folded his arms and again faced his interlocutor, while, with eyes gleaming with revenge from under their heavily drooping lids and lips that curled from time to time in a smile of bitter malignity, she watched him, listening eagerly for his testimony, losing no word that he said.

The young secretary well understood the character of the enemy with whom he had thus declared war, though he was as yet in ignorance of the weapons she would use against him, but the honeyed words of the little note crushed within his pocket had no power to swerve him for an instant from the course upon which he had determined.

After a few general questions, the coroner said,—

"Please state when and what was the first intimation received by you of any unusual occurrence."

"I was awakened this morning by a woman's scream and heard sounds of confused running in different directions. A few moments later Mr. Whitney came to my room and informed me of what had occurred, and I then went with him to the private rooms of Mr. Mainwaring."

"You were associated with Mr. Mainwaring yesterday during the greater part of the day and evening, were you not?"

"I was during the day, but I did not see him after dinner until late at night."

"Did you notice anything unusual in his appearance at any time yesterday?"

"He appeared rather depressed for about an hour after luncheon, during the execution of the will."

"Did you know any cause for such depression?"

"I attributed it, in my own mind, to the conversation at luncheon, to which Mr. Whitney has referred."

"Regarding one Richard Hobson?"

"Yes, sir."

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"Do you know what, if any, relations existed between Mr. Mainwaring and this Hobson?"

The black plumes of Mrs. LaGrange's fan suddenly quivered, her cheek paled, and her breath came and went quickly, but these were the only signs of agitation which she betrayed, as Scott replied,—

"I have no knowledge as to what relations existed between them of late. I only know that Mr. Mainwaring had, years ago, some important private business with this man."

"Will you state the nature of this business?"

"Without giving exact details," Scott replied, speaking deliberately but with no hesitation, though conscious of the surprise and indignation depicted on some of the faces about him, "this man was employed as an attorney by Mr. Mainwaring before the latter came to this country, and has since, at various times, extorted money from him by threats of exposure regarding certain transactions."

The silence that followed this statement was of itself eloquent. The young secretary felt every eye fastened upon himself, and, though his own eyes were fixed on the coroner's face, he saw reflected even there the general expression of mingled astonishment, incredulity, and resentment. Unmoved, however, he awaited, coolly and impassively, the next words of the coroner.

"Mr. Scott," said Dr. Westlake, a touch of severity in his tone, "this is a serious assertion to make regarding a man so widely known as Mr. Mainwaring, and so universally considered above reproach in his business transactions."

"I am aware of that fact, sir," replied Scott, calmly, "but reference to the private letter-files of Mr. Mainwaring will prove the truth of my assertion. I made this statement simply because the time and place demanded it. You were

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endeavoring to ascertain the cause of Mr. Mainwaring's perturbation on learning yesterday of the arrival of Hobson. I have given what I consider the clue.''

"How recently had this man Hobson extorted money from Mr. Mainwaring, and in what amount?''

"The last money sent him was about three years ago, a sum of five thousand dollars. Hobson wrote a most insolent letter of acknowledgment, stating that, as this money would set him on his feet for a time, he would not write again immediately, but assuring Mr. Mainwaring that he would never be able to elude him, as the writer would keep posted regarding his whereabouts, and might, some time in the future, call upon him in person.''

"Can you describe this man's appearance?''

"I cannot, having never met him.''

"Will you describe the stranger who is reported to have called in the afternoon.''

"He was tall, quite pale, with dark hair and moustache. He was dressed in a tweed suit, somewhat travel-worn, and wore dark glasses.''

"Did he state his errand?''

"Only that he wished to see Mr. Mainwaring on business of special importance. He at first seemed rather insistent, but, on learning that Mr. Mainwaring was out and that he would receive no business calls for a day or two, he readily consented to defer his interview until later.''

"Did he leave his name or address?''

"His card bore the name of J. Henry Carruthers, of London. He gave his present address as the Arlington House.''

"You noticed nothing unusual in his appearance?''

"The only thing that struck me as rather peculiar was that Mr. Carruthers seemed well informed regarding events expected to take place here, while his name was wholly unfamiliar to Mr. Mainwaring.''

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At this point a pencilled note was handed by the coroner to Mr. Whitney, who immediately summoned George Hardy and hastily despatched him on some errand.

"Mr. Scott," resumed the coroner, "were you in Mr. Mainwaring's private library at any time during last evening?"

"I was not. I spent the entire evening in my own room."

"When did you again see Mr. Mainwaring?"

"Not until after eleven o'clock. I had come down for a smoke in the grounds outside and met Mr. Mainwaring in the lower hall on the way to his rooms. He asked me to come to his library before retiring, as he wished to give some final directions for the next day. About half an hour later I went to the library door, but hearing loud and angry talk within, I waited in the hall some fifteen or twenty minutes until I knew Mr. Mainwaring was alone. I then entered, received his instructions, and went directly to my room for the night."

"Were you able to recognize the voices or hear any of the conversation?"

"I was. I recognized the voice of the housekeeper, Mrs. LaGrange; but feeling that I was hearing what was not intended for me, I walked back into the main hall and remained there until Mrs. LaGrange came out."

"You saw her leave the library?"

"Yes, sir; I passed her in the corridor."

"She saw you, of course?"

"She seemed scarcely conscious of my presence until we had passed; she then turned and watched me as I entered the library."

"What was the nature of the conversation which you heard?"

"I only heard what Mrs. LaGrange said. She evidently was very angry with Mr. Mainwaring."

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"Can you repeat her words as you heard them?"

"Not entirely. She accused Mr. Mainwaring of dishonesty, saying that he had defrauded his only brother, and had ignored and robbed his own son to put a stranger in his place. The last words I heard were, 'You are in my power, and you know it only too well; and I will make you and your high-born, purse-proud family rue this day's work.'"

Harry Scott, with the proof of his employer's crimes in his possession, repeated these words with an indifference and impassiveness that seemed unnatural, while the smouldering fire in his eyes gleamed fitfully, as though he knew some secret of which the others little dreamed.

But, if spoken indifferently, the words were not received with indifference. The reporters bent to their task with renewed ardor, since it promised developments so rich and racy. Ralph Mainwaring's face was dark with suppressed wrath; Mr. Thornton seemed hardly able to restrain himself; while the attorney grew pale with excitement and anger. Mrs. LaGrange alone remained unmoved, as much so as the witness himself, her eyes half closed and a cynical smile playing about her lips as she listened to the repetition of her own words.

"Did Mr. Mainwaring make no reply?" inquired the coroner.

"He did, but it was inaudible to me."

"You went into the library as soon as he was alone?"

"I did."

"At what hour was this?"

"A few minutes past twelve."

"Was that the last time you saw Mr. Mainwaring living?"

"It was."

"Can you state whether any one was in his rooms after you left?"

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"I cannot."

"Mr. Scott, by your own statement, you must have been in Mr. Mainwaring's library within an hour preceding his death; consequently, I would like you to give every detail of that interview."

"I am perfectly willing, sir, but there are few to give. The interview occupied possibly ten minutes. Mr. Mainwaring appeared very weary, and, after giving directions regarding any personal mail or telegrams which might be received, stated that he wished me to consider myself his guest on the following day and join in the festivities of the occasion. I thanked him, and, wishing him good-night, withdrew."

"In which room were you?"

"We were both in the library. When I first entered, Mr. Mainwaring was walking back and forth, his hands folded behind him, as was usually his habit when thinking deeply, but he immediately seated himself and gave me my instructions. The tower-room was dimly lighted and the curtains were drawn quite closely together at the entrance."

"Did you hear any unusual sound after reaching your room?"

"Not at that time. I was aroused about three o'clock this morning by what I thought was a stealthy step in the grounds in the rear of the house, but I listened for a moment and heard nothing more."

"That will do for the present, Mr. Scott. You will probably be recalled later," said the coroner, watching the secretary rather curiously. Then he added, in a different tone,—

"The next witness is Mrs. LaGrange."

There was a perceptible stir throughout the crowd as, with a movement of inimitable grace, Mrs. LaGrange stepped forward, darting a swift glance of such venomous

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hatred towards Scott, as he again seated himself beside Miss Carleton, that the latter, with a woman's quick intuition, instantly grasped the situation and watched the proceedings with new interest and closer attention.

As Mrs. LaGrange took her place and began answering the questions addressed to her, the eager listeners pressed still more closely in their efforts to catch every word, feeling instinctively that some startling developments would be forthcoming; but no one was prepared for the shock that followed when, in response to the request to state her full name, the reply came, in clear tones, with unequivocal distinctness,—

"Eleanor Houghton Mainwaring."

For an instant an almost painful silence ensued, until Dr. Westlake said,—

"Will you state your relation to the deceased?"

"I was the lawfully wedded, but unacknowledged, wife of Hugh Mainwaring," was the calm reply.

"Please state when and where your marriage took place," said the coroner, watching the witness narrowly.

"We were married privately in London, about three months before Mr. Mainwaring came to this country."

"How long ago was that?"

"A little more than twenty-three years."

"You say that you were privately married, and that in all these years Mr. Mainwaring never acknowledged you as his wife?"

"Yes. I was at that time a widow, and, owing to certain unpleasant circumstances attending the last months of my former husband's life, Mr. Mainwaring insisted that our marriage be strictly private. I acceded to his wishes, and we were married as quietly as possible. At the end of three months he deserted me, and for four years I did not even know where he had gone. During that time,

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however, I learned that my husband, who had been fearful of soiling his proud name by having it publicly joined with mine, was, in the sight of the law, a common criminal. I finally traced him to America, and five years after he deserted me I had the pleasure of confronting him with the facts which I had obtained. With passionate protestations of renewed love and fair promises of an honorable married life, he sought to purchase my silence, and, fool that I was! I yielded. He claimed that he could not at once acknowledge me as his wife, because he was already known as an unmarried man, but in the near future we would repeat the marriage ceremony and I should be the honored mistress of his heart and home. I believed him and waited. Meantime, our child was born, and then a new *rôle* had to be adopted. Had he not known that he was in my power, I would then have been thrust out homeless with my babe, but he dared not do that. Instead, I was brought to Fair Oaks dressed in widow's garb, as a distant relative of his who was to be his housekeeper. So, for my son's sake, hoping he would some day receive his rights, I have lived a double life, regarded as a servant where I should have been mistress, and holding that poor position only because it was within my power to put the master of the house in a felon's cell!"

"Can you produce the certificate of this marriage?" inquired the coroner, regarding the witness with a searching glance as she paused in her recital.

"Unfortunately," she replied, in a tone ringing with scorn and defiance, "I cannot produce our marriage certificate, as my husband kept that in his possession, and frequently threatened to destroy it. If it is in existence, it will be found in his safe; but I can produce a witness who was present at our marriage, and who himself signed the certificate."

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"State the name of this witness."

"Richard Hobson, of London."

"You are then acquainted with this Hobson?" the coroner inquired, at the same time making an entry in the memorandum he held.

"Naturally, as he was at one time my husband's attorney."

"He called at Fair Oaks yesterday, did he not?"

"He did."

"Do you know whether he called more than once?"

"He came a second time, in the evening, accompanied by his clerk."

"Was his object at either time to secure an interview with Mr. Mainwaring?"

"He called to see me on private business."

"Had he any intention of meeting Mr. Mainwaring later?"

"I know nothing regarding his intentions."

"Mrs. LaGrange," said the coroner, after a pause, "you were in Mr. Mainwaring's library between the hours of eleven and twelve last night, were you not?"

Her face darkened with anger at his form of address. "I was in my husband's library at that hour," she replied.

"How long were you there?"

"I cannot state exactly," she answered, indifferently; "perhaps half an hour."

"Did Mr. Scott repeat correctly your words to Mr. Mainwaring?"

"I have no doubt that he did. His memory on the subject is much better than mine."

"What was the meaning of your threat to Mr. Mainwaring, that you would make him and his friends regret the day's proceedings?"

"He understood my meaning. He knew that I could

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set aside the will, and could ruin him by exposing his duplicity and fraud.''

"What reply did he make?''

"He answered me, as usual, with sneers; but I saw that he felt somewhat apprehensive. I wished to give him a little time to reflect upon a proposition I had made, and I left the library, intending to return later; but,'' she added, slowly and significantly, "I was superseded by another visitor.''

"Explain your meaning,'' said the coroner, briefly.

"My husband's private secretary entered the library directly after I left. Some thirty minutes later I passed down the corridor towards the library, and was startled to hear Mr. Mainwaring, in loud and excited tones, denouncing some one as a liar and an impostor. The reply was low, in a voice trembling with rage, but I caught the words, 'You are a liar and a thief! If you had your deserts, you would be in a felon's cell to-night, or transported to the wilds of Australia!' There was much more in the same tone, but so low I could not distinguish the words, and, thinking Mr. Mainwaring was likely to be occupied for some time, I immediately retired to my room.''

"Was the voice of the second speaker familiar to you?'' inquired Dr. Westlake, in the breathless silence that followed this statement.

A half smile, both cunning and cruel, played around the lips of the witness, as she answered, with peculiar emphasis and with a ring of triumph in her tone,—

"The voice was somewhat disguised, but it was distinctly recognizable as that of Mr. Scott, the private secretary.''

To Scott himself, these words came with stunning force, not so much for the accusation which they conveyed, as that her recital of those words spoken within the library

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seemed but the repetition of words which had rung in his brain the preceding night, as, alone in his room, he had, in imagination, confronted his employer with the proof of his guilt which that afternoon's search had brought to light. His fancy had vividly portrayed the scene in which he would arraign Hugh Mainwaring as a thief, and would himself, in turn, be denounced as an impostor until he should have established his claims by the indubitable evidence now in his possession. Such a scene had in reality been enacted,—those very words had been spoken,—and, for an instant, it seemed to Scott as though he had been, unconsciously, one of the actors.

The general wonder and consternation with which he was now regarded by the crowd quickly recalled him, however, to the present situation, and awakened within him a sudden, fierce resentment, though he remained outwardly calm.

"At that time," continued the coroner, "were you of the opinion that it was Mr. Scott whom you heard thus addressing Mr. Mainwaring?"

"Yes, I had every reason to believe it was he, and I have now additional reasons for the same belief."

"Are these additional reasons founded on your own personal knowledge, or on the information of others?"

"Upon information received from various members of the household."

"Did you see Mr. Scott leave the library?"

"I did not."

"Can you state about what time you heard this conversation?"

"I went immediately to my room, and there found that it lacked only ten minutes of one."

"Did you hear any unusual sound afterwards?"

"I did not. I heard no one in the halls; and Mr.

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Mainwaring's apartments were so remote from the general sleeping-rooms that no sound from there, unless very loud, could have reached the other occupants of the house."

Further questions failed to develop any evidence of importance, and the witness was temporarily dismissed. Glancing at his watch, the coroner remarked,—

"It is nearly time to adjourn, but if Mr. Hardy has returned we will first hear what he has to report."

As the valet again came forward, Dr. Westlake asked, "Were you able to learn anything concerning the strangers who were here yesterday?"

"Not very much, sir," was the reply. "I went to the Arlington first and inquired for Mr. J. Henry Carruthers, and they told me there was no such person registered there; but they said a man answering that description, tall and wearing dark glassess, came into the hotel last evening and took dinner and sat for an hour or so in the office reading the evening papers. He went out some time between seven and eight o'clock, and they had seen nothing more of him."

"Was Richard Hobson at the Arlington?"

"No, sir; but I went to the Riverside, and found R. Hobson registered there. They said he came in in the forenoon and ordered a carriage for Fair Oaks. He came back to lunch, but kept his room all the afternoon. He had a man with him in his room most of the afternoon, but he took no meals there. After dinner Hobson went out, and nobody knew when he came back; but he was there to breakfast, and took the first train to the city. I made some inquiries at the depot, and the agent said there was a tall man, in a gray ulster and with dark glasses, who took the 3.10 train this morning to the city, but he didn't notice him particularly. That was all I could learn."

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As the hour was late, the inquest was then adjourned until ten o'clock the next morning. Every one connected with the household at Fair Oaks was expected to remain on the premises that night; and, dinner over, the gentlemen, including Mr. Whitney, locked themselves within the large library to discuss the inevitable contest that would arise over the estate and to devise how, with the least possible delay, to secure possession of the property.

Later in the evening Harry Scott came down from his room for a brief stroll through the grounds. A bitter smile crossed his face as he noticed the brightly illumined library and heard the eager, excited tones within, remembering the dimly-lighted room above with its silent occupant, unloved, unmourned, unthought of, in marked contrast to the preceding night, when Hugh Mainwaring lavished upon his guests such royal entertainment and was the recipient of their congratulations and their professions of esteem and regard.

As he paced slowly up and down the avenues, his thoughts were not of the present, but of the past and future. At the earliest opportunity that day he had returned to the city, ostensibly, to attend to some telegraphic despatches, but his main errand had been to consult with an eminent lawyer whom he knew by reputation, and in whom both Hugh Mainwaring and Mr. Whitney, in numerous legal contests, had found a powerful and bitter opponent. To him Scott had intrusted his own case, giving him the fullest details, and leaving in his possession for safe keeping the proofs which were soon to play so important a part; and Mr. Sutherland, the attorney retained by Scott, had been present at the inquest, apparently as a disinterested spectator, but, in reality, one of the most intensely interested of them all.

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CHAPTER VIII

THE WEAVING OF THE WEB

TEN o'clock found an eager crowd assembled in and about the large library at Fair Oaks, drawn by reports of the sensational features developed on the preceding day. The members of the household occupied nearly the same positions as on the preceding afternoon, with the exception of the secretary, who had entered the room a little in advance of the others and had seated himself near the coroner.

Notwithstanding the glances of doubt and distrust which Scott encountered, and his own consciousness that suspicion against himself would deepen as all the facts in the case became known, he was as impassive as ever. Even Mr. Whitney was wholly at a loss to account for the change in the bearing of the secretary. He was no longer the employee, but carried himself with a proud independence, as though conscious of some mysterious vantage-ground.

On the other side of the coroner, but conveniently near Scott, was Mr. Sutherland, while in the rear, commanding a good view of both gentlemen, as well as of nearly every face in the room, sat Mr. Merrick, though to a stranger his manner would have implied the utmost indifference to the proceedings.

The first witness called for by the coroner was Johnson, the butler. For the first five or ten minutes his testimony was little more than a corroboration of that given by the valet on the preceding day, of the discovery of the death of Hugh Mainwaring.

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"You say," said the coroner, "that at Mr. Whitney's request you remained in the upper hall, near the library and within call?"

"Yes, sir."

"Will you state how long a time you should think elapsed between the alarm given by Hardy and the appearance of the entire household, including both the guests and the servants?"

"Well, sir, Hardy gave the alarm a little after seven. The servants were already up and crowded around there immediately, and I should say that every one, including the ladies, was out within twenty minutes, or thirty at the latest, with the exception of Mrs. LaGrange and her son."

"At what time did the latter appear?"

"It must have been considerably after eight o'clock, sir, when she came to the library in response to a message from Mr. Whitney."

"And her son?"

"I did not see Mr. Walter LaGrange at all during the forenoon, sir."

"How was that?" inquired Dr. Westlake, rather quickly. "Was he not at Fair Oaks?"

"I cannot say, sir. I did not see him until luncheon."

"When did you last see Mr. Mainwaring?"

"A little after eleven o'clock night before last,—Wednesday night,—sir. I was in the hall as he passed upstairs to his rooms, and I heard him ask Mr. Scott to come to his library."

"Did there seem to be any coldness or unpleasantness between them?

"No, sir; they both appeared the same as usual."

"Did any strangers call at Fair Oaks Wednesday aside from those mentioned yesterday?"

"No, sir."

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"Will you describe the strangers who were here, stating when they called and any particulars you are able to give?"

"The man giving his name as R. Hobson called between eleven and twelve, Wednesday morning. He was tall, with thin features, small, dark eyes, and a very soft voice. He came in a carriage, inquired for Mrs. LaGrange, and seemed in considerable haste. He stayed about an hour. The gentleman who called about four in the afternoon also came in a carriage and inquired for Mr. Mainwaring, saying he had been directed to Fair Oaks at the city offices of Mainwaring & Co. On learning that Mr. Mainwaring was out, he asked for the secretary; and I took his card to Mr. Scott, who gave directions to have him shown up into the library. I do not know when he left. He was tall, with black hair and moustache and dark glasses."

"Mr. Hobson's call occasioned considerable comment at luncheon, did it not?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you observe that it had any effect on Mr. Mainwaring?"

"Well, sir, I thought he appeared considerably annoyed, and after luncheon he asked me whether Mr. Hobson had inquired for him."

"Did you admit Hobson when he called in the evening?"

"I did not, sir. I merely met him at the door and directed him to the south side entrance."

"At Mrs. LaGrange's request?"

"Yes, sir; in accordance with her instructions."

"Did she give any reason for such instructions?"

"Merely that his former call had caused so much remark she wished to receive him privately."

"Was he alone when he called the second time?"

"No, sir."

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"Can you describe the person who accompanied him?"

"No, sir. The man stood so far in the shadow that I could only see the outlines of his form. I should say he was about the same height as Mr. Hobson, but considerably heavier."

"Do you know at what hour they left?"

"No, sir."

Further questions failing to elicit any facts bearing upon the situation, the butler was dismissed, and Brown, the coachman, took his place. The latter was far less taciturn than the butler, seeming rather eager to impart some piece of information which he evidently considered of special importance.

After a few preliminary questions, the coroner said,—

"At what time, and from whom, did you first hear of Mr. Mainwaring's death?"

"About half-past seven, yesterday morning, sir. I was a-taking care of the horses, sir, when Uncle Mose—he's the gardener, sir—he comes past the stable on his way to the tool-house, and he tells me that Mr. Mainwaring had been murdered in the night, right in his own rooms, and then he tells me——"

"How long had you been up and at work in the stables?"

"Before I heard of the murder? Well, about an hour, I should say. I generally gets up at six."

"Had you been to the house that morning?"

"No, sir; but I went right up there after seeing Uncle Mose, and I was in the kitchen telling what I had seen the night before, when the butler he comes down and said as how Mr. Ralph Mainwaring wanted me, and that I had better keep my mouth shut till I was asked to tell what I knew."

"Where were you last Wednesday night?" asked the coroner, rather abruptly.

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Brown looked surprised, but answered readily, "I was out with some friends of mine. We all went down to the city together that night and stayed out pretty late, and it seems a mighty good thing we did, too."

"Why so?" asked the coroner.

"Well, sir," said Brown, deliberately, glad of an opportunity to tell his story and evidently determined to make the most of it, "as I said, we stayed out that night later than we meant to, and I didn't waste no time getting home after I left the depot. So, when I got to Fair Oaks, I thought I'd take the shortest cut, and so I come in by the south gate, off from the side street, and took the path around the lake to get to the stables."

"What lake do you mean?" interrupted the coroner.

"The small lake back of the grove in the south part of the grounds. Well, I was hurrying along through that grove, and all of a sudden I seen a man standing on the edge of the lake with his back towards me. He was very tall, and wore an ulster that came nearly to his feet, and he looked so queer that I stepped out of the path and behind some big trees to watch him. I hadn't no more than done so, when he stooped and picked up something, and come right up the path towards me. The moon was shining, had been up about two hours, I should say, but his back was to the light and I couldn't see his face, nor I didn't want him to see me. After he'd got by I stepped out to watch him and see if he went towards the house, but he didn't; he took the path I had just left and walked very fast to the south gate and went out onto the side street."

"In which direction did he then go?" asked the coroner.

"He went up onto the main avenue and turned towards the town."

"Can you describe his appearance?"

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"Only that he was tall and had very black hair; but his face was in the shadow, so I couldn't tell how he looked."

"What did he pick up from the ground?"

"I couldn't see very plain, but it looked like a small, square box done up in paper."

"You did not try to call any one?"

"No, sir. The man didn't go near the house, and I didn't think much about it until Uncle Mose told me yesterday morning that the night before he seen——"

"Never mind what he saw; we will let him tell his own story. Was that all you saw?"

"No, sir; it wasn't," replied Brown, with a quick side glance towards Mrs. LaGrange, who occupied the same position as on the preceding day. "I was going along towards the stables, thinking about that man, and all of a sudden I noticed there was a bright light in one of the rooms up-stairs. The curtains wasn't drawn, and I thought I'd see whose room it was, so I walked up towards the house carefully, and I saw Mr. Mainwaring's secretary. He looked awfully pale and haggard, and was walking up and down the room kind of excited like. Just then I happened to step on the gravelled walk and he heard me, for he started and looked kind of frightened and listened a moment, and then he stepped up quick and extinguished the light, and I was afraid he'd see me then from the window, so I hurried off. But I thought 'twas mighty queer——"

"Mr. Scott was dressed, was he?" interrupted the coroner.

"Yes, sir," Brown answered, sullenly.

"Did you go directly to your room?"

"Yes, sir."

"What time was this?"

"I heard the clock strike three just after I got in."

"You saw or heard nothing more?"

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"No, sir."

"You knew nothing of what had occurred at the house until the gardener told you in the morning?"

"N—yes—no, sir," Brown stammered, with another glance towards Mrs. LaGrange, who was watching him closely.

"What did you say?" demanded the coroner.

"I said I didn't know what had happened till Uncle Mose told me," Brown answered, doggedly.

"That will do," said the coroner, watching the witness narrowly as he resumed his place among the servants.

During the latter part of Brown's testimony, quick, telegraphic glances had been exchanged between Scott and Mr. Sutherland, and one or two slips of paper, unobserved by any one but Merrick, had passed from one to the other.

Scott was well aware that the statements made by the coachman had deepened suspicion against himself. He paid little attention to the crowd, however, but noted particularly the faces of the guests at Fair Oaks. Ralph Mainwaring's, dark with anger; that of the genial Mr. Thornton coldly averted; young Mainwaring's supercilious stare, and his sister's expression of contemptuous disdain; and as he studied their features his own grew immobile as marble. Suddenly his glance encountered Miss Carleton's face and was held for a moment as though under a spell. There was no weak sentimentality there, no pity or sympathy,—he would have scorned either,—but the perfect confidence shining in her eyes called forth a quick response from his own, though not a muscle stirred about the sternly-set mouth. She saw and understood, and, as her eyes fell, a smile, inexplicable and mysterious, flashed for an instant across her face and was gone.

"John Wilson," announced the coroner, after a slight pause.

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A middle-aged man, rather dull in appearance, except for a pair of keenly observant eyes, stepped forward with slow precision.

"You are Mr. Ralph Mainwaring's valet, I believe?" said the coroner.

"That I am, sir," was the reply.

"Have you been for some time in his employ?"

The man peered sharply at Dr. Westlake from under his heavy brows, and replied, with great deliberation, "Nigh onto thirty years, sir."

Then, noting the surprise in his interlocutor's face, he added, with dignity, "The Wilsons, sir, have served the Mainwarings for three generations. My father, sir, was valet to the father of the dead Hugh Mainwaring, the Honorable Ralph Maxwell Mainwaring, sir."

A smile played over the features of young Mainwaring at these words, but Scott started involuntarily, and, after studying Wilson's face intently for a moment, hastily pencilled a few words on a slip of paper which he handed to Mr. Sutherland, and both watched the witness with special interest.

His testimony differed little from that given by Hardy and by the butler. He stated, however, that, after accompanying Mr. Ralph Mainwaring to the scene of the murder, the latter sent him to summon Mr. Scott; but on his way to the young gentleman's room he saw Mr. Whitney in advance of him, who called the secretary and immediately returned with him to the library.

"Was Mr. Scott already up when Mr. Whitney called him?" the coroner inquired, quickly.

"He was up and dressed, sir," was the reply.

Wilson also corroborated the butler's statement that Walter LaGrange was not seen about the premises until luncheon, and stated, in addition, that the horse belonging

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to young LaGrange was missing from the stables until nearly noon. Having mingled very little with the servants at Fair Oaks, he had but slight knowledge concerning the occurrences of the day preceding the murder. His testimony was therefore very brief.

"Katie O'Brien, chambermaid," was next called; and in response a young Irish woman quietly took her place before the coroner. She answered the questions addressed her as briefly as possible, but with deliberation, as though each word had been carefully weighed.

"Did you have charge of the private rooms of Mr. Mainwaring?"

"Yes, sir."

"You took care of his rooms as usual Wednesday?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you see Mr. Mainwaring during the day or evening?"

"I met him once or twice in the halls."

"When did you last see him?"

"About two o'clock Wednesday afternoon."

"State how you first heard of his death."

"I was working in the halls up-stairs about seven that morning and heard running back and forth, as if there was trouble. I went out into the front hall and met the butler, and he told me Mr. Mainwaring had been murdered."

"Did you go in to see him at that time?"

"Yes, sir, for a moment."

"Did you notice anything unusual in his rooms?"

"I didn't notice anything unusual in Mr. Mainwaring's rooms."

"Did you in any room?"

"Yes, sir."

"In what one?"

"In Mr. Scott's room, a little later."

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"State what you observed."

"A few minutes after I left the library I saw Mr. Scott come out of his room and go away with Mr. Whitney, and I thought I would go in and do up the room. So I went in, but the bed was just as I had made it up the day before. It hadn't been slept in nor touched. Then things was strewn around considerable, and the top drawer of his dressing-case was kept locked all the forenoon until he went to the city."

"When did he go to the city?"

"About noon."

"Did you see Mr. Scott the day or evening preceding Mr. Mainwaring's death?"

"No, sir; but I know he was locked in Mr. Mainwaring's library all the afternoon, after the folks had gone out driving."

"How do you know the library was locked?"

"I was sweeping in the corridor, and I heard him unlock the door when the butler came up with some gentleman's card."

"Did you see the gentleman who came up-stairs later?"

"No, sir."

"Did you see Walter LaGrange at any time during yesterday forenoon?"

The witness colored slightly, but replied, "I think I met him once or twice; I don't remember just when."

"He was away from home part of the time, was he not?"

"I don't know where he was."

Nothing further of importance could be learned from the witness, and, as it was then past twelve, a short recess was taken until after lunch.

Scott took his place at the table with the guests, seemingly alike indifferent to cold aversion or angry frowns.

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He was conscious that Miss Carleton was watching him, her manner indicating the same frank friendliness she had shown him on the preceding day, and in response to a signal from her, as they rose from the table, he followed her into one of the drawing-rooms, joining her in a large alcove window, where she motioned him to a seat on a low divan by her side.

"You have made a bitter enemy in Mrs. LaGrange," she said, archly; "and she has marshalled her forces against you."

"Do you think so?" he asked, with an amused smile.

"Certainly. She displayed her tactics this morning. I am positive that much of the testimony was given in accordance with her orders."

"For the most part, however, the witnesses stated facts," Scott replied, watching her closely.

"Yes; but facts may be so misrepresented as to give an impression quite the reverse of the truth."

"That is so. And a misrepresentation having a foundation of truth is the hardest to fight. But," he added, in a lighter tone, "all this testimony against me does not seem to have produced the same impression upon you that it has upon the others. Your suspicions do not seem, as yet, to have been very thoroughly aroused."

"Perhaps my suspicions are as dormant as your own apprehensions. I fail to detect the slightest anxiety on your part as to the outcome of this, one way or another."

"No," he replied, after a pause; "I feel no anxiety, only resentment that circumstances have conspired against me just at this time, and contempt for people who will be led by appearances rather than their own judgment."

"People sometimes use very little judgment where their own personal interests are concerned."

"In that case," said Scott, as they rose to return to the

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"YOU HAVE MADE A BITTER ENEMY IN MRS. LAGRANGE," SHE SAID, ARCHLY

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library, where the others had already preceded them, "I suppose the word of one unprincipled woman and of three or four ignorant servants will be allowed to outweigh mine."

They had reached the library and Miss Carleton made no reply, but Scott again saw the same inscrutable little smile play over her features, and wondered at its meaning.

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CHAPTER IX

TANGLED THREADS

UPON resuming the examination, the first witness called for was Mary Catron, the second cook, a woman about thirty-five years of age, with an honest face, but one indicative of a fiery temper. Her testimony was brief, but given with a directness that was amusing. When questioned of the occurrences of the day preceding the murder, she replied,—

"I know nothing of what went on except from the gossip of the rest. My place was in the kitchen, and I had too much to do that day to be loitering round in the halls, leaning on a broom-handle, and listening at key-holes," and she cast a glance of scathing contempt in the direction of the chambermaid.

"Did this 'gossip' that you speak of have any bearing on what has since occurred?" the coroner inquired.

"Well, sir, it might and it mightn't. 'Twas mostly about the will that Mr. Mainwaring was making; and as how them that got little was angry that they didn't get more, and them as got much was growling at not getting the whole."

"How did the servants gain any knowledge of this will?"

"That's more than I can say, sir, except as I knows the nature of some folks."

Upon further questioning, the witness stated that on the night of the murder, between the hours of two and three, she was aroused by a sound like the closing of an outside

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door, but on going to one of the basement windows to listen, she heard nothing further and concluded she had been mistaken.

"Did you see the coachman at that time?" she was asked.

"A few minutes later I looked out again and I see him gaping and grinning at the house and jabbering to himself like an idiot, and I was minded to send him about his business if he hadn't a-took himself off when he did."

"He was perfectly sober, was he not?"

"Sober for aught that I know; but, to my thinking, he's that daft that he's noways responsible for aught that he says."

"Were you up-stairs soon after the alarm was given?" asked the coroner, when she had told of hearing from the butler the news of the murder.

"Yes, sir; I went up as soon as ever I heard what had happened."

"Who was in the library at that time?"

"Nobody but some of the servants, sir. I met Mr. Whitney just as I came out."

"Did you meet any one else?"

"I met no one, but I saw the housekeeper coming out of her son's room. She didn't see me; but she was telling him to get ready quick to go somewheres, and I heard her say to hurry, for every minute was precious."

Louis Picot, the head cook, could give no information whatever. When the alarm was given, he had rushed, with the other servants, to the scene of the murder, and in his imperfect English, accompanied by expressive French gestures, he tried to convey his horror and grief at the situation, but that was all.

The two maids who attended the English ladies were next called upon; but their testimony was mainly corrobo-

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rative of that given by the chambermaid, except that Sarah Whitely, Miss Carleton's maid, stated, in addition, that she had seen Mr. Walter LaGrange leave his mother's room in great haste and go down-stairs, and a little later, from one of the upper windows, saw him riding away from the stables in the direction of the south gate.

But one servant remained, "Uncle Mose," as he was familiarly called, the old colored man having charge of the grounds at Fair Oaks. His snow-white hair and bent form gave him a venerable appearance; but he was still active, and the shrewd old face showed both humor and pathos as he proceeded with his story. He had been a slave in his younger days, and still designated his late employer by the old term "mars'r." He was a well-known character to many present, including Dr. Westlake, who knew that in this instance questions would have to be abandoned and the witness allowed to tell his story in his own way.

"Well, Uncle Mose, you have been employed at Fair Oaks for a long time, haven't you?"

"Moah dan twenty yeahs, sah, I'se had charge ob dese y'er grounds; an' mars'r Mainwaring, he t'ought nobody but ole Mose cud take cyah ob 'em, sah."

"You were about the grounds as usual Wednesday, were you not?"

"I was 'bout de grounds all day, sah, 'case dere was a pow'ful lot to do a-gittin' ready for de big doins dere was goin' to be on mars'r's birfday."

"Did you see either of the strangers who called that day?"

"I'se a-comin' to dat d'rectly, sah. You see, sah, I wants to say right heah, befo' I goes any furder, dat I don' know noffin 'cept what tuk place under my own obserbation. I don' feel called upon to 'spress no 'pinions

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'bout nobody. I jes' wants to state a few recurrences dat I noted at de time, speshally 'bout dem strangers as was heah in pertickeler. Well, sah, de fust man, he come heah in de mawnin'. De Inglish gentlemens, dey had been a-walkin' in de grounds and jes' done gone roun' de corner ob de house to go to mars'r Mainwaring's liberry, when dis man he comes up de av'nue in a kerridge, an' de fust ting I heah 'im a-cussin' de driver. Den he gets out and looks roun' kind o' quick, jes' like de possum in de kohn, as ef he was 'fraid somebody done see 'im. I was fixin' de roses on de front poach, an' I looked at 'im pow'ful sharp, an' when de dooh opened he jumped in quick, as ef he was glad to get out o' sight. Well, sah, I didn't like de 'pearance ob dat man, an' I jes' t'ought I'd get anoder look at 'im, but he stayed a mighty long time, sah, an' bime'by I had to go to de tool-house, an' when I gets back the kerridge was gone."

"Could you describe the man, Uncle Mose?" the coroner asked.

"No, sah, I don' know as I could 'scribe 'im perzacly; but I'd know 'im, no matter where I sot eyes on 'im, and I know'd 'im the nex' time I see 'im. Well, sah, dat aft'-noon, mars'r Mainwaring an' de folks had gone out ridin', an' I was roun' kind o' permiscuous like, an' I see anoder kerridge way down de av'nue by de front gate, an' I waited, 'spectin' maybe I'd see dat man again. While I was waitin' by de front dooh, all ob a sudden a man come roun' from de side, as ef he come from mars'r Mainwaring's liberry, but he was anoder man."

"Didn't he look at all like the first man?" inquired the coroner.

"No, sah; he looked altogedder diff'rent; but I don' know as I could state whar'in de differensiashun consisted, sah. Dis man was berry good lookin' 'ceptin' his eyes,

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an' dem yoh cudn' see, 'case he had on cull'ed glasses. Mebbe his eyes was pow'ful weak, er mebbe he didn't want nobody to see 'em; but I 'spicioned dem glasses d'rectly, sah, an' I watched 'im. He goes down to de kerridge an' takes out a coat an' says sump'in to de driver, an' de kerridge goes away tow'ds de town, an' he walks off de oder way. Bime'by I see 'im gwine back again on de oder side ob de street——''

"Was he alone?'' interrupted the coroner.

"Yes, sah; an' I done kep' my eye on 'im, an' he didn' go on to de town, but tuhned down de fust side street. Well, sah, I didn' see no moah ob 'im den; but dat ebenin' I'd ben a-workin' roun' de house, sprinklin' de grass and gettin' ready foh de nex' day, when I happens to pass by de side dooh, an' I sees dem two men comin' out togedder.''

"What time was this, Uncle Mose?'' the coroner asked, quickly.

"Well, sah,'' said the old man, reflectively, "my mem'ry is a little derelictious on dat p'int, but I knows 'twas gettin' putty late.''

"Are you sure these were the same two men you had seen earlier in the day?''

"Yes, sah; 'case I stepped in de bushes to watch 'em. Dey talked togedder berry low, an' den one man goes back into de house, an' I seen 'im plain in de hall light, an' he was de fust man; an' while I was a-watchin' 'im, de oder man he disappeahed an' I cudn' see 'im nowhar, but I know'd he was de man dat came in de aft'noon, 'case he look jes' like 'im, an' toted a coat on his arm. Well, sah, I t'inks it a berry cur'is sarcumstance, an' I was jes' comin' to de preclushun dat I'd mention it to some ob de fambly, when de fust man, he come to de dooh wid de housekeeper. I was in de shadder and dey didn' see me,

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but I heah 'im say, kind o' soft like, 'Remember, my deah lady, dis is a biz'ness contract; I does my part, an' I 'spects my pay.' An' she says, 'Oh, yes, yoh shall hab yohr money widout fail.' An' I says to myse'f, 'Mose, yoh ole fool, what you stan'in' heah foh? Dat ain't nuffin dat consarns yoh nohow,' an' I goes home, an' dat's all I know, sah. But I'se ben pow'ful sorry eber sence dat I didn' let mars'r Mainwaring know 'bout it, 'case I has my 'spicions,'' and the old darkey shook his head, while the tears coursed down his furrowed cheeks.

"How did you hear of Mr. Mainwaring's death?" asked the coroner.

"De coachman, he done tole me, sah."

"Why, the coachman stated that you told him what had occurred."

"No, sah; he done tole me; I'd come up to de place pow'ful ahly dat mawnin' 'case dere was to be such big doings dat day, an' I was gwine to de tool-house foh sump'in, an' I see mars'r Walter ridin' away from de stables pow'ful fas' on his hoss——"

"Do you mean Walter LaGrange?"

"Yes, sah; an' de coachman he came out an' I ax 'im whar de young man was gwine dat ahly, an' he say mars'r Mainwaring ben killed, an' mars'r Walter had to go to town as fas' as his hoss cud take 'im.''

"Do you know when he returned?"

"He came back, sah, befo' berry long, an' den he went away agin and didn't come back till mos' noon."

When the old darkey had been dismissed the coachman was recalled.

"What did you mean by stating that you first heard of Mr. Mainwaring's death from the gardener, when the reverse was the truth?"

"I don't know," he replied, carelessly; "I s'pose I got

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mixed. I remember talking with him about it, and I thought he told me."

"You had forgotten the interview with Walter LaGrange, I presume."

Brown made no answer.

"Why did you not mention that?"

"I wasn't asked to," he replied in insolent tones; "you said nothing to me about Mr. LaGrange."

"You are expected to state in full every occurrence having any bearing on the situation. You may give the particulars of that interview now."

"There's nothing to tell more than Uncle Mose told. I was working in the stables as usual, and Mr. LaGrange came in in a big hurry and ordered me to saddle his horse as quick as I could, that Mr. Mainwaring had been murdered, and he'd got to go to town."

"At what time was this?"

"About half-past seven, I should say."

"Did he state his errand?"

"No, sir."

"When did he return?"

"I saw his horse standing in the yard outside the stables about half an hour after, and then 'twas gone, and I didn't see it again till noon."

Walter LaGrange was next called. He stated that he had spent the greater part of the day preceding the murder away from Fair Oaks; he had not been at home to luncheon or dinner, and consequently knew nothing of the strangers seen on the place that day. He had returned about half-past ten that evening, and remembered seeing Mr. Mainwaring and his guests seated on the veranda, but he had gone directly to his room without meeting any one. The first intimation which he had received of any unusual occurrence the next morning was when his mother entered

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his room and told him that Mr. Mainwaring had either been murdered or had committed suicide, no one knew which.

"Was that her only object in coming to your room?"

"No, sir; she wanted me to do an errand for her."

"Will you state the nature of this errand?"

"It was only to deliver a note."

"To whom?"

"To Mr. Hobson," the young man answered weakly, while his mother frowned, the first sign of emotion of any kind which she had betrayed that day.

"Did you deliver the note?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then, under your mother's orders, you went to the city on your second trip, did you not?"

"Y—yes, sir."

"Were you successful in finding Mr. Hobson there?"

"Yes, sir," the witness answered sullenly.

"You had other business in the city aside from meeting him, had you not?"

Between the coroner's persistence and his mother's visible signs of displeasure, Walter LaGrange was fast losing his temper.

"If you know so much about this business, I don't see the use of your questioning me," he retorted angrily. "It's no affair of mine anyway; I had nothing to do with it, nor I won't be mixed up in it; and if you want any information you'd better ask mother for it; it's her business and none of mine."

After a few more questions, which the witness answered sullenly and in monosyllables, he was dismissed.

"Mr. Higgenbotham," announced the coroner. The greatest surprise was manifested on every side as the senior member of a well-known firm of jewellers stepped

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forward; the same gentleman who had accompanied Mr. Whitney on his return from the city on the preceding day.

"Mr. Higgenbotham," said the coroner, "I believe you are able to furnish some testimony which will be pertinent at this time."

"Yes, Dr. Westlake," responded the other, in deep, musical tones, "I think possibly I can render you a little assistance in your investigations."

"Mr. Higgenbotham, do you recognize the young gentleman who has just given his testimony?"

"I do, sir," said the witness, adjusting a pair of eyeglasses and gazing steadily at Walter LaGrange. "I recall his features perfectly."

"You were personally acquainted with the late Hugh Mainwaring, I believe?"

"Yes, sir, intimately acquainted with him."

"You are, I believe, familiar with the Mainwaring jewels which are now missing?" continued the coroner.

Walter LaGrange looked uncomfortable and his mother's cheek paled.

"I am, sir; having had them repeatedly left in my possession for safe keeping during their owner's absence from home; and I have also a complete list of them, with a detailed description of every piece."

"Very well, Mr. Higgenbotham, will you now please state when, and under what circumstances, you saw this young gentleman?"

"I was seated in my private office yesterday morning, when my head clerk came in and asked me to step out into the salesrooms for a moment, as he said a young man was there trying to sell some very fine jewels, and, from his youth and his ignorance of their value, he feared something was wrong. I went out immediately and saw this young gentleman, who handed me for inspection a superb

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diamond brooch and an elegant necklace of diamonds and pearls. I instantly recognized the gems as pieces from the old Mainwaring collection of jewels. Simultaneously there occurred to my mind the report of the murder of Hugh Mainwaring, which I had heard but a short time before, although then I knew nothing of the robbery. Naturally, my suspicions were awakened. I questioned the young man closely, however, and he stated that his home was at Fair Oaks, and that his mother was a distant relative of Mr. Mainwaring's; that the jewels were hers, and she wished to dispose of them for ready cash to meet an emergency. His story was so plausible that I thought possibly my suspicions had been somewhat hasty and premature. Still, I declined to purchase the jewels; and when he left the store I ordered one of our private detectives to follow him and report to me. In the course of an hour the detective returned and reported that the young man had sold the jewels to a pawnbroker for less than one-fourth their actual value. About half an hour later I heard the news of the robbery at Fair Oaks, and that the family jewels were missing; and knowing that Mr. Whitney was here, I immediately telephoned to him the facts which I have just stated. He came in to the city at once, and we proceeded to the pawnshop, where he also identified the jewels."

Mr. Higgenbotham paused for a moment, producing a package from an inner pocket, which he proceeded to open.

"We secured a loan of the jewels for a few days," he continued, advancing towards the coroner. "Here they are, and here is a copy of the list of which I spoke. By comparing these gems with the description of those which I have checked on the list, you will see that they are identical."

He placed the open casket on the table. There was a

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moment's silence, broken by subdued exclamations of admiration as Dr. Westlake lifted the gems from their resting-place.

"You are correct," he said; "the description is complete. There is no doubt that these are a part of the collection. I see you have marked the value of these two items as seven thousand dollars."

"Yes; that is a moderate valuation. And were the prices of the other articles carried out, you would see that, with the exception of a few very small pieces, these have the least value of the entire lot. I believe I can be of no further service."

Mrs. LaGrange was next recalled.

"Have you anything to say in reference to the testimony just given?" the coroner inquired.

"I have this much to say," she replied, haughtily, "that I could have given you the history of those jewels, including, perhaps, some facts of which even Mr. Higgenbotham and Mr. Whitney are in ignorance, and thus have spared you the infinite pains you have taken to make public the straits to which I was reduced, because of my position here, when in need of a little ready money. I could have informed you that they were originally a part of the old Mainwaring collection of gems, until they were given me by my husband."

"It hardly seems consistent that a man who treated his wife in the manner in which you claim to have been treated would bestow upon her gifts of such value as these," the coroner remarked with emphasis.

"They were of little value to him," she answered, with scorn; "as you have been informed, they were the poorest which he possessed. Besides, there were times when I could persuade him to almost anything,—anything but to acknowledge his lawful wife and his legitimate son."

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"Was the money which you were forced to raise by the sale of these jewels to be paid to Hobson?"

"It was."

"In accordance with the terms of your contract with him, made a few hours preceding the death of Mr. Mainwaring?"

"Yes," she replied, defiantly. "And as you probably would ask the nature of that contract, I will save you the trouble Knowing that my son and I were likely to be defrauded of our rights in the same manner in which Hugh Mainwaring had defrauded others, I engaged Mr. Hobson as my attorney, as he, better than any one else, knew the facts in the case. When I learned yesterday morning of my husband's death, I realized that I would have immediate need of his services, and accordingly sent him word to that effect. He demanded a large cash payment at once. The result of this demand Mr. Higgenbotham has already told you."

"How was Hobson to secure for you your rights from Hugh Mainwaring?"

"That was left entirely to his own discretion."

"Will you describe the appearance of Mr. Hobson's clerk?"

"Unfortunately, I am unable to do so. He was merely brought as a witness to our contract. I knew that he was present, but he remained in the shadow, and I took no notice of him whatever."

"Your contract, then, was a verbal one?"

"It was."

Upon being closely questioned, Mrs. LaGrange reiterated her assertions of the preceding day, laying particular stress upon the alleged interview between Hugh Mainwaring and his secretary, after which she was dismissed, and Harry Scott was recalled.

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"Mr. Scott," said the coroner, "what were the relations existing between Mr. Mainwaring and yourself up to the time of his death?"

Scott flushed slightly as he replied, "Those ordinarily existing between employer and employed, except that I believe Mr. Mainwaring accorded me more than usual consideration, and I, while duly appreciative of his kindness, yet took especial pains never to exceed the bounds of an employee."

"Were there ever any unpleasant words passed between you?"

"None whatever."

"Was your last interview with Mr. Mainwaring of a friendly nature?"

"Entirely so."

"What have you to say in reference to the testimony given to the effect that your voice was heard and recognized in angry conversation with Mr. Mainwaring at nearly one o'clock?"

"I have to say that it is false, and without foundation."

"Do you mean to say that the statement of the witness was wholly without truth?"

"I do not deny that such an interview, as alleged by the witness, may have taken place, for that is something concerning which I have no knowledge whatever; but I do deny that she heard my voice, or that I was in the library at that time, or at any time after about twenty minutes past twelve."

"Was that the time at which you went to your room?"

"Very near that time, as my interview with Mr. Mainwaring could not have exceeded ten minutes."

"At what time did you retire?"

"I sat up very late that night, for my mind was so

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occupied with some personal matters that I felt no inclination for sleep. I lighted a cigar and became so absorbed in my own thoughts that I was totally unaware of the lapse of time, until I was aroused by what I thought was a stealthy step outside. I then became conscious, for the first time, that I was very weary, both physically and mentally, and I also discovered that it was nearly three o'clock. Astonished to find it so late, and exhausted by hours of protracted thought, I threw myself as I was upon a low couch, where I slept soundly until awakened in the morning."

Further questions failed to reveal any discrepancy in his statement, and he was dismissed.

The testimony of Ralph Mainwaring and of his son added nothing of interest or importance. Mr. Thornton testified to his incidental meeting with Hobson and to the reputation which the man had borne in London. When he had resumed his seat the coroner remarked,—

"As a matter of form, I will have to call upon the ladies, though it is not expected they will be able to furnish any information throwing light on this mysterious case."

It was, as he had said, little more than a ceremony and occupied but a few moments. Miss Carleton was the last one called upon. She stated that it was nearly eleven o'clock when she reached her room, but added that she did not retire immediately, as her cousin, Miss Thornton, had come in, and they had chatted together for more than an hour; that while so engaged, she heard Mr. Scott come up-stairs and enter his room, which adjoined hers, and lock the door for the night.

"At what hour was this?" inquired the coroner.

"It could not have been more than twenty minutes after twelve, as it was twenty-five minutes after twelve when my

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cousin went to her room, and this was about five minutes earlier.''

"Can you state whether or not he left his room within the next half-hour?''

"I know that he did not,'' she replied. "I can testify that he remained in his room until after one o'clock. After my cousin left I discovered that the moon was just rising, and the view across the Hudson being extremely beautiful, as well as novel to me, I extinguished the light in my room and sat down by the open window to enjoy it. I heard Mr. Scott stepping quietly about his room for a few moments; then all was still. I sat for some time admiring the scenery, until I was aroused by hearing him pacing back and forth like a person in deep thought. I then found it was much later than I supposed,—nearly one o'clock,—and I immediately retired; but so long as I was awake I could hear him walking in his room.''

As Miss Carleton finished her testimony it was evident that the tide of general opinion had turned somewhat in favor of the young secretary, but the latter quietly ignored the friendly glances cast in his direction.

It was generally supposed that all testimony in the case had now been heard. Considerable surprise was, therefore, manifested when the coroner nodded to Mr. Whitney, who, in turn, beckoned to some one in the hall. In response the butler appeared, ushering in a tall man, with cadaverous features and small, dark eyes, which peered restlessly about him.

"Richard Hobson,'' announced the coroner.

"At your service, sir,'' said the man, advancing with a cringing gait and fawning, apologetic smile.

"Mr. Hobson,'' said the coroner, after a few preliminaries, "I understand you were somewhat acquainted with the late Hugh Mainwaring.''

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"Well, yes, sir, *somewhat*," the other replied in soft, insinuating tones, but with peculiar emphasis on the word used by Dr. Westlake. "Indeed, I might say, without exaggeration, that I was probably better acquainted with that estimable gentleman than was any one in this country."

"When did you last see Mr. Mainwaring?"

"I have not seen him to speak with him for fully twenty-three years."

"You have corresponded with him, however, in that time?"

The witness showed no surprise.

"We exchanged a few letters while I was in England. I have neither heard from him nor written to him since coming to this country."

"When did you last see him, regardless of whether you spoke to him or not?"

"Probably within the last two or three weeks. I have occasionally met him on the street."

"Did Mr. Mainwaring see you at any of these times?"

"If he did, he did not recognize me."

"Did you see him when you called at Fair Oaks, Wednesday,—either morning or evening?"

"I did not."

"Mr. Hobson, will you describe the man who accompanied you when you called in the evening, Wednesday?"

"I could give you a general description. He was a large man, about my own height, but heavier, and rather good looking, on the whole. But I am not good on details, such as complexion, color of hair, and so on; and then, you know, those little things are very easily changed."

"What was his name?"

Mr. Hobson smiled blandly. "The name by which I know him is John Carroll, but I have no idea as to his real name. He is a very eccentric character, many-sided as it

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were, and I never know which side will come uppermost."

"He is your clerk and in your employ, is he not?"

"Agent, I think, would be a preferable term. He is in my employ, he transacts certain business for me, but he does it in his own way, and comes and goes at his own discretion."

"Where is he at present?"

"I have no idea, sir."

"Did he leave for the city that night, or did he remain with you at the Riverside Hotel?"

"He was not with me at the hotel except for a few hours. I have not the slightest idea from whence he came to see me, when he went away, or in what direction he went. He was in haste to be excused as soon as our joint business was done, and I have not seen him since."

"Did he have on dark glasses that day?"

"Not when I saw him, but that was only in my room at the hotel, and for a few moments in this house; he would have no need for them at either place."

"Did he not accompany you from the hotel to Fair Oaks?"

"No, sir; we met here by prearrangement."

"When do you expect to see your agent again?"

"Whenever he has any business reports to make," Hobson replied, with an exasperating smile; "but I have no idea when that will be. He has other commissions to execute; he is in the employ of others besides myself, and transacts some business on his own account also."

"I understand, Mr. Hobson, that you have repeatedly extorted money from Mr. Mainwaring by threatening to disclose facts in your possession regarding some questionable transaction."

"No, sir; my action could not be termed extortion or

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blackmail within the meaning of the law, though to any one conversant with Mr. Mainwaring's private correspondence it may have had that appearance. I was, however, merely making an effort to collect what was legally due me. Mr. Mainwaring, before leaving England, had voluntarily bound himself to pay me a certain sum upon the condition that I would not reveal certain transactions of considerably more than 'questionable' character. I kept my part of the contract, but he failed in his. I wrote him, therefore, threatening, unless he fulfilled his share of the agreement, to institute proceedings against him, which would naturally involve a disclosure of his secret. He never paid me in full and the secret is still mine," he paused, then added slowly, "to keep or to sell, as will pay me best."

"Was Hugh Mainwaring ever married?" the coroner asked, abruptly.

"I believe he was not generally considered a married man, sir."

"Was there ever any private marriage?"

Hobson smiled enigmatically. "You already have the word of the lady herself, sir; that should be sufficient. I cannot reveal any of Hugh Mainwaring's secrets,—unless I am well paid for it!"

Hobson was dismissed without further questions, and the examination being now at an end, the coroner's jury retired to the room in the rear of the library. Very few left the house, for all felt that little time would be required for the finding of a verdict, and comment and opinion were freely exchanged.

"Well," said Mr. Sutherland, turning towards the secretary with a smile, "they did not learn one fact from that last witness, for I doubt whether one of the few statements he did make had an iota of truth in it. By the way, Mr.

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Scott, it's a very fortunate thing that you've got the proofs you have. It would be a risky piece of work to depend on that man's word for proof; he is as slippery as an eel. With those proofs, however, there is no doubt but that you've got a strong case."

"It will be hard to convince Ralph Mainwaring of that fact."

"Yes, he looks as though he would hold on to his opinions pretty tenaciously."

"Not so tenaciously as he would grasp any money coming within his reach!"

At a little distance, Mr. Whitney was engaged in conversation with the Englishmen.

"I never thought he could be in any way connected with it," he was saying. "In the first place, there was no motive, there could be none; then, again, I believe he is altogether above suspicion. I know that Mr. Mainwaring had the most implicit confidence in him."

"Well," said Mr. Thornton, "for my part, I'm heartily glad if there is nothing in it. I always liked the young fellow."

"That's just where I don't agree with you; I don't like him," Ralph Mainwaring replied in a surly tone. "He may be all right so far as this matter is concerned; I don't say yet that he is or isn't; but I do say that to defame a man's character after he's dead, in the manner he has, is simply outrageous, and, you may depend upon it, there's some personal spite back of it."

"Oh, well, as to Hugh's character, I don't think you or I are going to fret ourselves about that," laughed Mr. Thornton. "He probably sowed his wild oats with the rest of us, and there may have been some reason for his leaving England as he did."

"I don't believe it," Ralph Mainwaring retorted, an-

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grily; but before he could say more, the doors opened and the coroner's jury filed into the room. There was instant silence, and a moment later the verdict had been announced. It was what every one had expected, and yet there was not one but experienced a feeling of disappointment and dissatisfaction.

"We find that the deceased, Hugh Mainwaring, came to his death by the discharge of a revolver in the hands of some person or persons to us unknown."

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CHAPTER X

THE crowd dispersed rapidly, passing down the oak-lined avenue in twos and threes, engaged in animated discussion of the details of the inquest, while each one advanced some theory of his own regarding the murder. Mr. Sutherland had taken his departure after making an appointment with Scott for the following day, and the latter now stood in one of the deep bow-windows engrossed with his own thoughts. Suspicion had been partially diverted from himself, but only partially, as he well knew, to return like a tidal wave, deepened and intensified by personal animosity, whenever the facts he had thus far so carefully concealed should become known. He gave little thought to this, however, except as it influenced him in planning his course of action for the next few days.

He was aroused from his revery by the sound of approaching steps, and, turning, met Mr. Whitney.

"Ah, Mr. Scott, I was just looking for you. I thought possibly you had slipped back to the city with the crowd. I wanted to say, Mr. Scott, that, if it will be agreeable to you, I wish you would remain at Fair Oaks for the next few days, or weeks, as the case may be. Mr. Ralph Mainwaring has retained my services to aid in securing his title to the estate, and the will having been destroyed, complications are likely to arise, so that it may take some time to get matters adjusted. Much of the business will, of necessity, have to be transacted here, as all of Mr.

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Mainwaring's private papers are here, and if you will stay and help us out I will see, of course, that your salary goes right on as usual.''

An excuse for remaining at Fair Oaks was what Scott particularly desired, but he replied indifferently, "If it will accommodate you, Mr. Whitney, I can remain for a few days.''

"Very well. I cannot say just how long we may need you, though I anticipate a long contest.''

"Against Mrs. LaGrange?''

"Yes; though she has, in my opinion, no legal right whatever, yet she will make a hard fight, and with that trickster Hobson to help her with his chicanery, it is liable to take some time to beat them.''

"You expect to win in the end, however?''

"Certainly; there is no doubt but that Ralph Mainwaring will win the case. He will get the property either for his son or for himself. We are first going to try to have the will upheld in the courts. Failing in that, the property will, of course, be divided between the nearest heirs, Ralph Mainwaring and a younger bachelor brother; in which event, the whole thing will, in all probability, finally revert to his son Hugh.''

"Mr. Whitney, what is your opinion of Mrs. LaGrange's story of a private marriage?''

The attorney shook his head decidedly. "One of her clever lies; but if she ever undertakes to tell that little romance in court, I'll tear it all to shreds. She never was married to Hugh Mainwaring; but,'' he added, slowly, "I may as well tell you that Walter was his son. Mr. Mainwaring the same as admitted that to me once; but I am certain that, aside from that fact, that woman had some terrible hold on him, though what I never knew. By the way, Mr. Scott, do you know anything of the

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particulars of that transaction to which those letters referred and to which Hobson alluded to-day?"

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Whitney looked keenly at the young man. "You obtained your knowledge originally from other sources than Mr. Mainwaring's correspondence, did you not?"

"Yes, sir."

"I thought so. Do you know, Mr. Scott, I would denounce the whole thing as a lie, a scheme of that adventuress, or that impostor, Hobson, or both, by which they hope to gain some hold on the heirs, were it not that, from your manner, I have been convinced that you have some personal knowledge of the facts in the case,—that you know far more than you have yet told."

Mr. Whitney paused, watching the young secretary closely, but there was no reply, and, with all his penetration, the attorney could read nothing in the immobile face before him. He continued,—

"Whatever that transaction may have been, I wish to know nothing about it. I was much attached to Mr. Mainwaring and respected him highly, and I want to respect his memory; and I will tell you frankly what I most dread in this coming contest. I expect nothing else but that either that woman or Hobson will drag the affair out from its hiding-place, and will hold it up for the public to gloat over, as it always does. I hate to see a man's reputation blackened in that way, especially when that man was my friend and his own lips are sealed in death."

"It is a pity," said Scott, slowly; "but if one wishes to leave behind him an untarnished reputation, he must back it up, while living, with an unblemished character."

"Well," said the attorney, tentatively, after another pause, "Mr. Mainwaring's character, whatever it may

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have been before we were associated with him, certainly had no effect upon your life or mine, hence I feel that it is nothing with which we are directly concerned; and I believe, in fact I know, that it will be for your interest, Mr. Scott, if you say nothing regarding whatever knowledge you may have of the past.''

Mr. Whitney, watching the effect of his words, suddenly saw an expression totally unlike anything he had ever seen on the face of the secretary, and yet strangely familiar.

Scott turned and faced him, with eyes cold and cynical and that seemed to pierce him through and through, remarking, in tones of quiet irony, "I am greatly obliged for your advice, Mr. Whitney, regarding my interests, but it is not needed. Furthermore, I think all your thought and attention will be required to look after the interests of Ralph Mainwaring,'' and without waiting for reply, he stepped through one of the low, old-fashioned windows opening upon the veranda and disappeared, leaving the attorney alone.

"By George, but that was cool!'' ejaculated the latter. "And that look; where have I seen it? I believe that Ralph Mainwaring is more than half right after all, and there is something back of all this!''

So absorbed was he in his own reflections as to be wholly unaware of the presence of the detective in the hall, near the doorway, where he had paused long enough to witness the parting between Scott and the attorney, and who now passed quietly up-stairs, remarking to himself, "Whitney is pretty sharp, but he's more than got his match there. That young fellow is too deep for him or any of the rest of 'em, and he's likely to come out where they least expect to find him.''

Half an hour later, Mr. Merrick, stepping from the private library into the upper southern hall, heard the

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sound of voices, which, from his familiarity with the rooms, he knew must proceed from Mrs. LaGrange's parlor. He cautiously descended the stairs to the lowest landing, in which was a deep window. The shutters were tightly closed, and, concealing himself behind the heavy curtains, he awaited developments. He was now directly opposite the door of the parlor, and through the partially open transom he could hear the imperious tones of Mrs. LaGrange and the soft, insinuating accents of Hobson. For a while he was unable to distinguish a word, but the variations in Hobson's tones indicated that he was not seated, but walking back and forth, while Mrs. LaGrange's voice betrayed intense excitement and gradually grew louder.

"You are not altogether invulnerable," Merrick heard her say, angrily. "You were an accessory in that affair, and you cannot deny it?"

Hobson evidently had paused near the door, as his reply was distinctly audible. "You have not an atom of proof, as you well know; and even if you had, our acquaintance, my dear madam, has been too long and of too intimate a nature for you to care to attempt any of your little tricks with me. You play a deep game, my lady, but I hold the winning hand yet."

"If you are dastardly enough to threaten me, I am not such a coward as to fear you. I have played my cards better than you know," she answered, defiantly.

"My dear lady," Hobson replied, and the door-knob turned slightly under his hand, "those little speeches sound very well, but we both understand each other perfectly. You want my services in this case; you must have them; and I am willing to render them; but it is useless for you to dictate terms to me. I will undertake the case in accordance with your wishes, but only upon the conditions mentioned."

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The reply was inaudible, but was evidently satisfactory to Hobson, for, as he opened the door, there was a leer of triumph on his face. He glanced suspiciously about the hall, and, on reaching the door, turned to Mrs. LaGrange, who had accompanied him, saying, in his smoothest tones,—

"I shall be out again in two or three days. Should you wish to see me before that time, you can telephone to my office or send me word."

She bowed silently and he took his departure, but as she returned to her room, she exclaimed, fiercely, "Craven! Let me but once get my rights secured, and he will find whether I stand in fear of him!"

Having taken leave of Mrs. LaGrange, Hobson carefully avoided the front part of the house and grounds, taking instead the gravelled walk leading through the grove towards the lake in the rear and out upon the side street. As he was hurrying along this rather secluded avenue, he was suddenly confronted by Scott. Although strangers to each other, Hobson instantly conjectured that this must be the secretary who had betrayed such familiarity with the correspondence which had passed between himself and Hugh Mainwaring, and that it might be to his own interest to form the acquaintance of the young man.

Quick as thought he drew from his pocket a card, and, pausing suddenly in his rapid walk, said, with a profound bow,—

"I beg pardon; I cannot be mistaken; have I not the pleasure of addressing Mr. Scott?"

"That is my name," replied the secretary, coldly.

"I beg you will accept this card; and allow me to suggest that you may find it conducive to your interests to call upon me at the address named, if you will take the trouble to do so."

Scott glanced from the card to the speaker, regarding

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the latter with close scrutiny. "You seem very solicitous of the interests of a stranger, as it is not to be presumed that you have any ulterior motive in making this suggestion."

Hobson appeared to ignore the sarcasm. "It is barely possible," he continued, in his most ingratiating tones, "that I may be in possession of facts which it would be to your advantage to learn."

"In case you are, I suppose, of course, you would impart them to me simply out of pure disinterestedness, without a thought of pecuniary compensation?"

Hobson winced and glanced nervously about him. "I must hasten," he said; "I cannot stop for explanations; but you will find me in my office at two o'clock to-morrow, if you care to call. Meantime, my young friend, I am not perhaps as mercenary as you think, and I may be able to be of great assistance to you," and with a final bow, the man hastily disappeared around a turn of the winding walk.

Scott proceeded in the opposite direction in a deep study. "Is it possible," he soliloquized, "that that creature is on my track and has any proposition to make to me? Or, is he afraid that I know his secret, and that I may deprive him of his hold upon the Mainwarings? More likely it is the latter. A week ago I was looking for that man, and would probably have endeavored to make terms with him, though it would have involved an immense amount of risk, for a cast-iron contract wouldn't hold him, and his testimony would be worth little or nothing, one way or the other." Scott glanced again at the address on the card. "Not a very desirable locality! It probably suits him and his business, though. I believe I will give the scoundrel a call and see what I can draw out of him."

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Dinner was announced as Scott returned to the house, and a number of circumstances combined to render the meal far pleasanter and more social than any since the death of the master of Fair Oaks. Mr. Merrick was nowhere to be found, and the slight restraint imposed by his presence was removed. Mrs. LaGrange and her son were also absent, preferring to take their meals privately in an adjoining room which Hugh Mainwaring had often used as a breakfast-room. The silence and frigidity which had lately reigned at the table seemed to have given place to almost universal sociability, though Ralph Mainwaring's face still wore a sullen scowl.

As Mr. Whitney met the secretary, his sensitive face flushed at the remembrance of their late interview, and he watched the young man with evident curiosity. Scott was conscious, however, of an increased friendliness towards himself on the part of most of the guests, but feeling that it was likely to prove of short duration, he remained non-committal and indifferent. As they left the table, Miss Carleton rallied him on his appearance.

"Mr. Scott, you are a mystery!"

"Why so, Miss Carleton, if you please?" he asked, quickly.

"Just now, when everybody's spirits are relaxing after that horrible inquest, you look more serious and glum than I have ever seen you. I threw myself into the breach this afternoon to rescue you from the enemy's grounds, whither you had been carried by the sensational statements of Mrs. LaGrange and the coachman and chambermaid, and I have not even seen you smile once since. Perhaps," she added, archly, "you didn't care to be rescued by a woman, but would have preferred to make your own way out."

"No," said Scott, smiling very brightly now; "I'll not be so ungrateful as to say that, though I believe I am

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generally able to fight my own battles; but I will confess I was somewhat disappointed this afternoon when you gave your testimony.''

"How could that be?'' she inquired, greatly surprised.

"Up to that time I had flattered myself that I had one friend who had faith in me, even though circumstances conspired against me. I discovered, then, that it was no confidence in me, but only a knowledge of some of the facts, that kept her from turning against me like the rest.''

Scott spoke in serio-comic tones, and Miss Carleton looked keenly in his face to see if he were jesting.

"No; you are mistaken, Mr. Scott,'' she said, slowly, after a pause. "My confidence in you would have been just as strong if I had known nothing of the facts.''

"Thank you; I am very glad to hear that,'' he answered. Then added, gently, "Would it be strong enough to stand a far heavier strain than that, if it were necessary?''

His tones were serious now, and she regarded him inquiringly for a moment before speaking; then seeing young Mainwaring approaching with his sister and Miss Thornton, she replied, in low tones,—

"I have no idea to what you refer, Mr. Scott, and I begin to think you are indeed a 'mystery;' but you can be assured of this much: I would never, under any circumcumstances, believe you capable of anything false or dishonorable.''

Scott's eyes expressed his gratification at these words, and he would then have withdrawn, but neither Miss Carleton nor young Mainwaring gave him an opportunity to do so without seeming discourteous. Both drew him into conversation and found him exceedingly entertaining, though reserved concerning himself. Isabel Mainwaring still held herself aloof and took little part in the conversation, but

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to make amends for this Miss Thornton bestowed some of her most winning smiles upon the handsome young secretary, her large, infantile blue eyes regarding him with wondering curiosity.

After a pleasant evening, Scott excused himself and retired to his room; but an hour or two later there was a knock at his door, and on opening it he saw young Mainwaring in smoking-cap and -jacket.

"I say, Scott, won't you come out and have a smoke? I've got some fine cigars, and it's too pretty a night to stay in one's room; come out on my balcony and we'll have a bit of a talk and smoke."

Scott readily consented, and the two young men proceeded to the balcony upon which Mainwaring's room opened, where the latter had already placed two reclining chairs and a small table containing a box of his favorite Havanas.

For a few moments they puffed in silence, looking out into the starlit night with its beauty of dim outline and mysterious shadow. Mainwaring was the first to speak.

"I say, Scott, I'm awfully ashamed of the way that some of us, my family in particular, have treated you within the last day or two. It was confoundedly shabby, and I beg your pardon for my share in it, anyhow."

"Don't waste any regrets over that matter," Scott answered, indifferently; "I never gave it any thought, and it is not worth mentioning."

"I do regret it, though, more than I can tell, and I haven't any excuse for myself; only things did look so deucedly queer there for a while, don't you know?"

"Well," said Scott, pleasantly, "we are not out of the woods yet, and there is no telling what developments may arise. Things might 'look queer' again, you know."

"That's all right. I know a gentleman when I see him,

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unless I happen to lose my head, and that doesn't occur very often. Now it's different with the governor. He's got so confoundedly wrought up over that will, don't you know, that he can't think of anything else, and there's no reason in him."

"As I understand it," remarked Scott, "Mr. Mainwaring expects to win the property in any case, either for you or for himself."

"Yes; and naturally you might think that the loss of the will wouldn't amount to much, one way or the other; but it's like this: the governor and I are very different; I know we've got plenty of ducats, and that's enough for me, but not for him; he is ambitious. It has always galled him that we were not in the direct line of descent from the main branch of the Mainwarings; and it has been his one great ambition since the death of old Ralph Mainwaring, Hugh's father, a few years before I was born, to win into his own family the old Mainwaring estate. He had an idea that Hugh would never marry, and gave me his name, hoping that I would be made his heir. Should the governor succeed in this scheme of his, he will immediately buy back the Mainwaring estate, although he knows I don't care a rap for the whole thing, and we will then have the honor, as he considers it, of perpetuating the old family line. On the other hand, if the property goes to the nearest heirs, it will be divided between him and his younger brother. Uncle Harold has no more ambition than I have, and though he is at present a bachelor, that is no guarantee that he will remain one; and, anyhow, it isn't likely that there will be much of his share left when he gets through with it. So you see how much importance the governor attached to that will."

"I understand," said Scott, as his companion paused. Then he added, musingly, "Your uncle's name seems to

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be rather unusual among the Mainwarings; I do not recall your having mentioned it before."

"What, Harold? On the contrary, it is the great name in our family, especially in the main line. I would have been given that name if the governor had not been looking out for Hugh Mainwaring's money. There was a direct line of Harolds down to my great-grandfather. He gave the name to his eldest son, but he died, and the next one, Ralph, Hugh's father, took up the line. Guy, my grandfather, was the youngest."

"One would almost have thought that Hugh Mainwaring would have borne the name of Harold," commented Scott.

Young Mainwaring smoked for a moment in silence, then said, in lower tones, "Old Uncle Ralph had a son by that name."

"Indeed! Had Hugh Mainwaring a brother?" Scott asked in surprise.

"Yes, there was a brother, but he died a great many years ago. There is quite a story connected with his name, but I don't know many of the particulars, for the governor seldom alludes to it. I know, however, that Harold was the elder son, but that Uncle Ralph disinherited him for marrying against his wishes, and afterwards died of grief over the affair, and soon after his father's death Harold was lost at sea."

"You say he married; did he leave any children?"

"No, I believe he had no children; but even if he had, they would have been disinherited also. Uncle Ralph was severe; he would not even allow Harold's name to be mentioned; and Hugh also must have turned against his brother, for I have heard that he never spoke of him or allowed any allusion to be made to him."

"Well," said Scott, after a pause, "I believe Hugh Mainwaring's life was far from happy."

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"You are right there. I'll never forget the last words he ever spoke to me as I took leave of him that night. They were to the effect that he hoped when I should have reached his age, I would be able to look back over a happier past than his had been. It is my opinion, too, that that woman was the cause of his unhappiness, and I believe she is at the bottom of all this trouble."

Their conversation had drifted to the mystery then surrounding them, and for more than an hour they dwelt on that subject, advancing many surmises, some strangely improbable, but none of which seemed to bring them any nearer a solution of the problem.

"My first visit to this country has proved an eventful one," said young Mainwaring, as, at a late hour, they finally separated for the night, "and I don't know yet how it may terminate; but there's one thing I shall look back upon with pleasure, and that is my meeting with you; and I hope that from this time on we will be friends; and that this friendship, begun to-night, will be renewed in old England many a time."

"Are you not rather rash," Scott inquired, slowly, "considering how little we know of each other, the circumstances under which we have met, and the uncertainty of what the future may reveal?"

"No; I'm peculiar. When I like a fellow, I like him; and I've been studying you pretty closely. I don't think we need either of us be troubled about the future; but I'm your friend, Scott, and, whatever happens, I'll stand by you."

"So be it, then, Hugh," replied the secretary, clasping the hand of the young Englishman and, for the first time, calling him by name. "I thank you, and I hope you will never go back on that."

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CHAPTER XI

SKIRMISHING

On the following morning the gentlemen at Fair Oaks were astir at an unusually early hour, and immediately after breakfast held a brief conference. It was decided to offer a heavy reward for the apprehension of the murderer of Hugh Mainwaring, while a lesser reward was to be offered for information leading to identification and arrest of the guilty party. Preparations were also to be made for the funeral, which would take place the next day, and which, in accordance with the wishes of Ralph Mainwaring, was to be strictly private.

Their conference at an end, Ralph Mainwaring ordered the carriage to take himself, Mr. Whitney, and the secretary to the depot.

"I believe I will ride down with you," said Mr. Merrick.

"Certainly; plenty of room. Going to the city?"

"Yes; but not with you gentlemen. We will part company at the depot and I will take another car."

"How are you getting on, Mr. Merrick?" inquired Mr. Thorton.

"As well as can be expected, all things considered," was the non-committal reply.

"Going to be a slow case, I'm afraid," commented Ralph Mainwaring, shaking his head in a doubtful way, while Mr. Thornton added jokingly,—

"We've got some mighty fine fellows over home there at the Yard; if you should want any help, Mr. Merrick, I'll cable for one of them."

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"Thank you, sir," said the detective, with quiet dignity; "I don't anticipate that I shall want any assistance; and if I should, I will hardly need import it from Scotland Yard."

"Ha, ha! That all depends, you know, on what your man is. If the rascal happens to have any English blood in him, it will take a Scotland Yard chap to run him down."

"On the principle, I suppose, of 'set a rogue to catch a rogue,'" Merrick replied, smiling.

He had scarcely finished speaking when Hardy suddenly entered the room.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said, addressing Ralph Mainwaring; "but the coachman is gone! We've looked everywhere for him, but he's nowhere about the place."

"When did he go?" asked Mr. Whitney, quickly.

"Nobody knows, sir. Joe, the stable-boy, says he hasn't been around at all this morning."

"Bring the boy here," said Mr. Mainwaring.

There was instantly recalled to every one present the memory of Brown's insolent manner at the inquest, together with his confused and false statements. In a few moments Hardy returned with the stable-boy, an unkempt, ignorant lad of about fourteen, but with a face old and shrewd beyond his years.

"Are you one of the servants here?" Mr. Mainwaring inquired.

"I works here, ef that's wot yer mean; but I don't call myself nobody's servant."

"How did it happen that you were not at the inquest?" he demanded.

"Didn't got no invite," was the reply, accompanied by a grin, while Hardy explained that the boy did not belong to the place, but had been hired by the coachman to come nights and mornings and attend to the stable work.

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"What do you know about this Brown?" inquired Mr. Mainwaring, addressing the boy.

"Wal, I guess he's ben a-goin' it at a putty lively gait lately."

"You mean he was fast?"

"I guess that's about the size of it."

"When did you see him last?"

"Hain't seen nothin' of him sence las' night, an' then he was sorter crusty an' didn't say much. I come down this mornin' an' went to work,—he allus left the stable key where I could get it,—but I hain't seen nor heard nothin' o' him. Me'n him," with an emphatic nod towards Hardy, "went up to his room, but he warn't there, nor hadn't ben there all night."

"Why do you think he was fast?"

"Wal, from all I've hearn about him I guess he's ben goin' with a kinder hard set lately. I've seen some putty tough-lookin' subs hangin' 'round the stables. There was a lot of 'em waitin' for him Wednesday night."

"Wednesday night!" ejaculated Mr. Whitney. "At what time? and who were they?"

"I dunno who they was, but they was hangin' 'round about eight o'clock waitin' for him to go with 'em. An' then he's had lots of money lately."

"How do you know this?"

"I've hearn him a-jinglin' it in his room; an' night afore las' I clim' up-stairs and peeked in, an' he had a whole pile of gold pieces 'bout that high," measuring with his hands; "but he see me, an' he said he'd gimme a whalin' ef he catched me at it agin."

"Did you watch him last night?" asked Mr. Mainwaring.

"Yas; he acted so kinder queer that I waited 'round to see what he was goin' to do. After 'twas still an' he

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thought I'd gone, he come down an' started off towards the side street. Jes' fer fun I follered him; an' when he got to the lake he stopped and looked all 'round, as ef to make sure there warn't nobody to see him, an' then he takes somethin', I couldn't see what, out from under his coat an' chucks it quick into the lake, an' then he started on a run down towards the street.''

"Couldn't you see what he threw?''

"No, I couldn't see what 'twas; but it struck the water awful heavy.''

"Is that all you know about the affair?''

"Yas, that's all.''

"Wait a moment,'' said Mr. Merrick, as the boy turned to leave the room. "Can you tell how many, or what kind of looking men were with Brown on Wednesday night?''

"There was three of 'em. One was a big feller with kinder squint eyes, the other two was ornery lookin' fellers; one of 'em was dark like a furriner, an' t'other one had sorter yeller hair.''

"How long were they there?''

"About half'n hour, I guess. They was all gone 'fore nine o'clock.''

"Did you hear anything that was said?''

"I hearn 'em talkin' somethin' about the boss.''

"Mr. Mainwaring?''

"Yas. He'd made a kick about somethin' or 'nuther that afternoon, an' Brown he was cussin' mad, an' then when they went away I hearn one of 'em say somethin' about 'makin' a good job of it.'''

"How was this, Hardy?'' inquired Mr. Whitney. "Had there been any words Wednesday between Mr. Mainwaring and the coachman?''

"Yes, sir; I had forgotten it; but now I remember that

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when he came back that afternoon, he found some fault with the coachman, and Brown was very insolent, and then Mr. Mainwaring threatened to discharge him.''

"'Pon my soul! I should say here was something worth looking into,'' said Mr. Thornton, as the boy left the room, accompanied by Hardy.

"A great pity that we could not have had his testimony at the inquest,'' commented the attorney. "We might then have cornered Brown; but I was not aware that there was such a person employed on the place.''

Meanwhile, a carriage ordered by telephone from the Arlington had already arrived at Fair Oaks.

"Well,'' said Ralph Mainwaring, "the carriage is waiting. We had better proceed to the depot; we can talk of this latest development on our way.''

"You will excuse me, gentlemen,'' said Mr. Merrick, quietly, "I have changed my mind, and will postpone my trip to the city.''

"Struck a new trail, eh?'' queried Ralph Mainwaring, with a peculiar expression, as he paused to light a cigar.

"On the contrary, sir, only following up an old one,'' and, with a somewhat ambiguous smile, the detective withdrew.

The coachman's sudden disappearance, together with the facts learned from the stable-boy, formed the subject of discussion for the next half-hour between Ralph Mainwaring and the attorney, Scott listening with a thoughtful face, although taking little part in the conversation. Upon their arrival at the offices of Mainwaring & Co. they were given a cordial greeting by Mr. Elliott and Mr. Chittenden, after which they passed on to the elegant private offices of Hugh Mainwaring. Mr. Whitney was visibly affected as he entered the familiar rooms, and to each one was forcibly recalled the memory of their meeting a few days before.

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A brief silence followed, and then in subdued tones they began to discuss the business which had now brought them there.

At about two o'clock that afternoon, Scott found himself entering an ancient and dilapidated looking block in a rather disreputable part of the city. He had fulfilled his appointment with Mr. Sutherland, and after an hour's conversation both gentlemen appeared very sanguine regarding the case under consideration. As Scott was taking leave, he produced Hobson's card and related the particulars of their incidental meeting at Fair Oaks, and Hobson's urgent invitation to call upon him at his office.

Mr. Sutherland laughed. "About what I expected," he said. "It was evident from his remarks at the inquest that some one—probably Mrs. LaGrange—had posted him concerning you, and he is afraid you are onto his secret."

"I had questioned if it were that, or whether possibly he might be onto mine."

"Not at all probable," said the attorney, after a moment's reflection. "If he really understood your position, he would be far too cunning to allow you to get sight of him. You have the scoundrel completely in your power."

"Yes, as much as he is in anybody's power; but it is doubtful if any one can hold so slippery a rascal as he. I believe I will give him a call, however."

"It would do no harm, taking care, of course, that you give him no information."

"Oh, certainly," said Scott, with a smile, as he paused for an instant in the doorway; "my object will be to get, not give, information."

"His object will probably be the same," was Mr. Sutherland's parting shot, as he turned with a laugh to his desk.

Scott, having ascended a narrow, crooked stairway, found himself in a long, dark hall, poorly ventilated, and

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HOBSON SILENTLY BECKONED SCOTT TO ENTER

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whose filthy condition was only too apparent even in the dim light. Far in the rear he saw a door bearing the words, "R. Hobson, Attorney." As he pushed open the door, a boy of about seventeen, who, with a cigarette in his mouth and his feet on a table, sat reading a novel, instantly assumed the perpendicular and, wheeling about, faced Scott with one of the most villainous countenances the latter had ever seen. Something in Scott's appearance seemed to surprise him, for he stared impudently without speaking. After silently studying the face before him for an instant, Scott inquired for Mr. Hobson.

"He is in, sir, but he is engaged at present with a client," said the boy, in tones which closely resembled Hobson's. "I will take in your card, sir."

The boy disappeared with the card into an adjoining room, returning a moment later with the most obsequious manners and the announcement that Mr. Hobson would be at liberty in a few moments. Scott rightly judged that this ceremony was merely enacted for effect, and contented himself with looking about the small, poorly furnished room, while the office boy opposite regarded him with an undisguised curiosity, which betrayed that this client—if such he could be regarded—differed greatly from the usual class. Young and untaught though he were, he had learned to read the faces about him, and that of his employer was to him as an open book, and the expression which flashed into Hobson's eyes as they fell upon Scott's card indicated plainly to the office boy that in this instance the usual conditions were reversed, and the attorney stood in fear of his visitor.

A few moments later the door of the next room opened noiselessly and Hobson, attired in a red dressing-gown and wearing his most ingratiating smile, silently beckoned Scott to enter. With a quick glance the latter took in every

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detail of the second apartment. It was somewhat larger than the first, but the furnishing was meagre and shabby in the extreme, and, with the exception of a small set of shelves containing a few dilapidated volumes, there were no visible signs of an attorney's office.

Hobson did not speak until he had carefully closed the door, then he said, in low tones,—

"As our conversation is likely to be of a confidential nature, you would perhaps desire greater privacy than can be secured here. Step this way."

He opened the door into a room so dark and so thick with stale tobacco smoke that at first Scott could discern nothing clearly.

"My den!" said Hobson, with a magnificent flourish, and Scott stepped within, feeling, he afterwards said, as though he were being ushered by Mephistopheles into the infernal regions, and this impression was not lessened by the first objects which he was able to distinguish,—a pair of skulls grinning at him through the smoky atmosphere.

As his eyes became accustomed to the dim light he noted that the room was extremely small, with only one window, which opened upon the blank wall of an adjoining building, and with no furniture, save an enormous, high-top desk and two chairs. One of the latter Hobson placed near the window for his visitor, and then busied himself for a moment at the desk in hastily concealing what to Scott looked like some paraphernalia of the black arts. Upon the top of the desk were the two skulls which had first attracted Scott's attention, and which he now regarded rather curiously. Hobson, following his glance, said, by way of explanation,—

"Rather peculiar ornaments, I dare say, you consider those, Mr. Scott; but I am greatly interested in phrenology and devote much of my leisure time to its study. It is not

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only amusing, you know, but it is of great assistance in reading and understanding my fellow-men, and enables me to adapt myself to my clients, so to speak.''

Having satisfactorily arranged his belongings, Hobson locked the door, and, seating himself behind his desk, appeared ready for business.

"Well, my young friend,'' he began, "I rather expected you, for I flatter myself that I understand enough of human nature to know that there are very few who will pass by an opportunity of learning something for the advancement of their own interests or the betterment of their own condition in life.''

"That may be perfectly natural,'' Scott replied; "but you flatter yourself altogether too much if you think that I have come here with any expectation that you can advance my interests or better my condition.''

"That remains to be seen. Much also depends upon yourself, for I take it that a young man of your calibre is not without ambition.''

Hobson paused, regarding his visitor with sharp scrutiny, but receiving no reply, continued, "I might add, that to a young man with ambitious designs such as yours, I would probably be able to render great assistance.''

"I am not aware of any unusual ambition on my part.''

"Oh, no, nothing unusual. You simply had no intention of remaining Hugh Mainwaring's secretary any longer than was necessary. That was perfectly natural, perfectly laudable, my young friend, and I admire the shrewdness and foresight with which you set about to accomplish your designs. At the same time, I believe I am in a position to give you just the information and advice you need in order to insure your success.''

Both men had the same object in view. Each wished to ascertain what the other knew concerning himself. Scott,

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unable to determine whether Hobson had spoken at random or with an inkling of the facts, answered, coldly,—

"I do not know to what you refer, or on what grounds you base the inference which you seem to have drawn."

"No? Then you will allow me to remark, Mr. Scott, that such familiarity as yours with a portion of Hugh Mainwaring's private correspondence, extending back over a period of fifteen or more years, taking into consideration the facts that you cannot be much more than twenty-five years of age, and have only been about two years in Mr. Mainwaring's employ, would indicate that you had sought to acquaint yourself with some facts connected with your employer's early life with the express purpose of using the same to your own advantage."

"You must see the inconsistency of such a supposition, when you consider that I have been in possession of these facts for some time—it is unnecessary to state how long—and have made no use of them whatever."

"Possibly," said Hobson, with emphasis, "your knowledge of the facts may not have been definite enough to warrant your use of them."

His voice and manner unconsciously betrayed the importance which he attached to Scott's reply. The latter detected this, and answered evasively,—

"It is sufficiently definite for my own personal satisfaction in any event."

Hobson shook his head. "It is useless to evade the point. You had an object in looking up that correspondence; you intended to make a good thing out of the facts you got hold of; and, if your information is sufficiently complete, you can make a good thing out of them yet."

"If I have not attempted anything of that kind in the past, would I be likely to try it at this late day?" Scott

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asked, with the air of one who is open to any available suggestion.

Hobson at once assumed a confidential manner, and, moving a little nearer his visitor, replied, in a low tone,—

"Look here, Mr. Scott, that's just why I wanted to meet you. You see I know more about you than you think. I've taken an unusual interest in you, too; and, seeing the little game you were playing, and knowing that I held the trump card myself, I naturally would like to take a hand and help you out at the same time. Now, the point is just this, Mr. Scott: What do you really know concerning the transaction referred to in that correspondence? I suppose you are familiar with all the letters that passed on both sides?"

"Perfectly so."

"Certainly. But you will acknowledge, Mr. Scott, that those letters were expressed in very guarded terms, and, with the exception of possibly one or two, gave no hint of the nature of that transaction. Remember," he added, impressively, "I have an exact copy of the correspondence on both sides, and no one could ever assume any statement or admissions that were not there."

"I presumed that, of course," said Scott, calmly.

"Now, my young friend, let us get down to the actual knowledge which you have of the facts. You are, I suppose, aware that there was a missing will involved in the case?"

"I am; and that one or two of your letters purported to show that the missing will was destroyed by Hugh Mainwaring."

"Did I make any such allegation?"

"Not directly; but your allusions and references would be clear to any one having a knowledge of the English statutes."

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Hobson started, and inquired quickly, "Are you familiar with English law?"

"I made myself familiar with your citations and references in this case."

"I see; you have indeed made a study of the case. Well, Mr. Scott, permit me to say that I accused Hugh Mainwaring of nothing which he had not previously confessed to me himself. Have you any knowledge concerning that will,—its terms or conditions, or the names of the testator or beneficiaries?"

"There was nothing in the correspondence to give any clue to those particulars. I could only gather that Hugh Mainwaring had defrauded others and enriched himself by destroying this will."

Hobson looked relieved. "Without doubt, he did; but allow me to call your attention to one point, Mr. Scott. You see how little actual knowledge you have of this affair. There are others—Mrs. LaGrange, for instance, and the mysterious individual whom she heard conversing with Mr. Mainwaring on the night of the murder,—all of whom know as much or more than you; and while this meagre knowledge of the case might perhaps have been sufficient to bring to bear upon Mainwaring himself, personally, it would have little or no weight with those with whom we would now have to deal. You know nothing of the terms of the will, or of the persons named as beneficiaries, whom, consequently, Hugh Mainwaring defrauded. You have no proof that he destroyed the will. In fact, my dear young friend, you could produce no proof that such a document ever existed at all!"

"Do I understand you, then, that those letters, Mr. Mainwaring's included, would not be regarded as proof?" Scott asked, with well-feigned surprise.

"Not of themselves with these people; I know them

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