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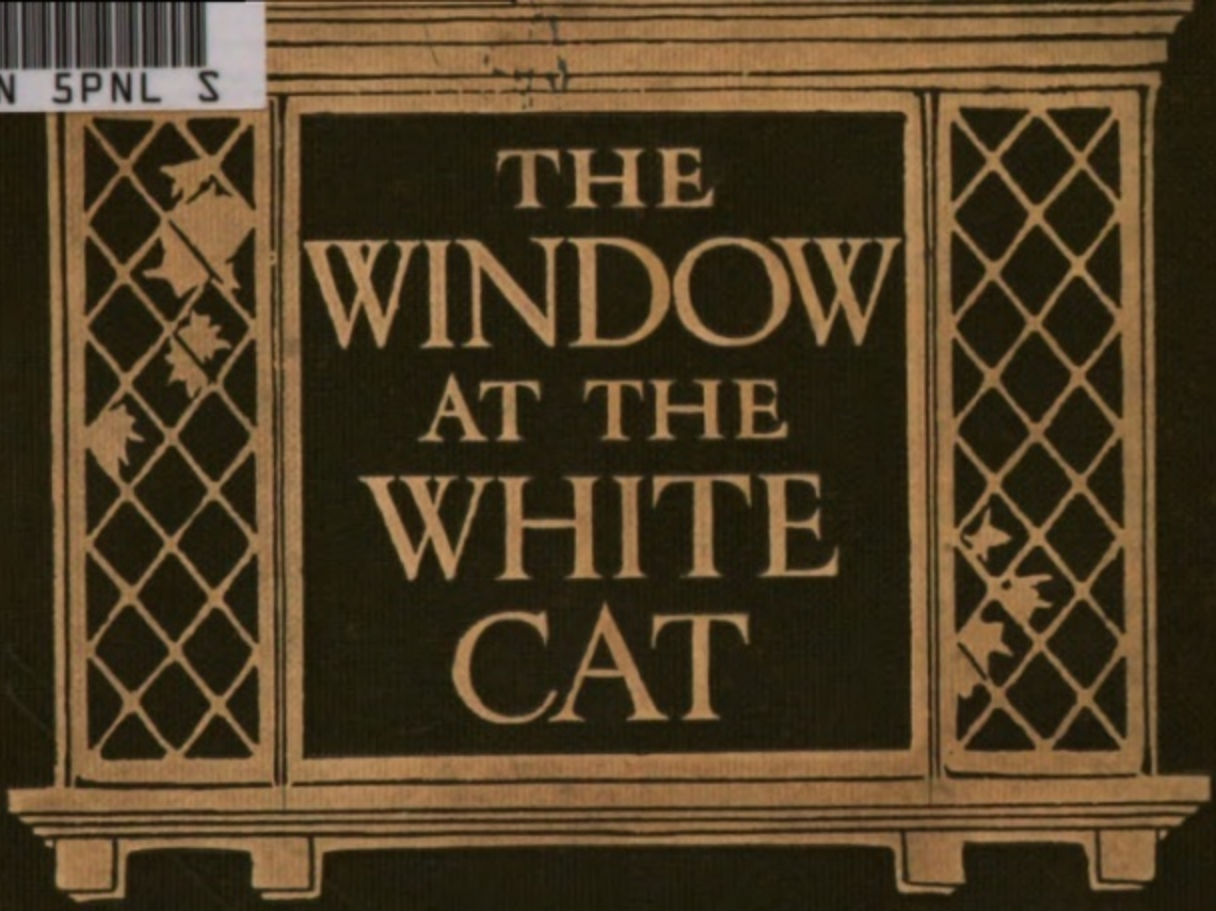

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THE WINDOW AT THE WHITE CAT

By

MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

Author of

THE CIRCULAR STAIRCASE
THE MAN IN LOWER TEN
WHEN A MAN MARRIES

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
ARTHUR I. KELLER

INDIANAPOLIS
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CHAPTER I

SENTIMENT AND CLUES

IN my criminal work anything that wears skirts is a lady, until the law proves her otherwise. From the frayed and slovenly petticoats of the woman who owns a poultry stand in the market and who has grown wealthy by selling chickens at twelve ounces to the pound, or the silk sweep of Mamie Tracy, whose diamonds have been stolen down on the avenue, or the staidly respectable black and middle-aged skirt of the client whose husband has found an affinity partial to laces and fripperies, and has run off with her—all the wearers are ladies, and as such announced by Hawes. In fact, he carries it to excess. He speaks of his wash lady, with a husband who is an ash merchant, and he an-

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nounced one day in some excitement, that the lady who had just gone out had appropriated all the loose change out of the pocket of his overcoat.

So when Hawes announced a lady, I took my feet off my desk, put down the brief I had been reading, and rose perfunctorily. With my first glance at my visitor, however, I threw away my cigar, and I have heard since, settled my tie. That this client was different was borne in on me at once by the way she entered the room. She had poise in spite of embarrassment, and her face when she raised her veil was white, refined, and young.

"I did not send in my name," she said, when she saw me glancing down for the card Hawes usually puts on my table. "It was advice I wanted, and I—I did not think the name would matter."

She was more composed, I think, when she found me considerably older than herself. I saw her looking furtively at the graying places over my ears. I am only thirty-five, as far as that goes, but my family, although it keeps its hair, turns gray early—a business asset but a social handicap.

"Won't you sit down?" I asked, pushing out a

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chair, so that she would face the light, while I remained in shadow. Every doctor and every lawyer knows that trick. "As far as the name goes, perhaps you would better tell me the trouble first. Then, if I think it indispensable, you can tell me."

She acquiesced to this and sat for a moment silent, her gaze absently on the windows of the building across. In the morning light my first impression was verified. Only too often the raising of a woman's veil in my office reveals the ravages of tears, or rouge, or dissipation. My new client turned fearlessly to the window an unlined face, with a clear skin, healthily pale. From where I sat, her profile was beautiful, in spite of its drooping suggestion of trouble; her first embarrassment gone, she had forgotten herself and was intent on her errand.

"I hardly know how to begin," she said, "but suppose"—slowly—"suppose that a man, a well-known man, should leave home without warning, not taking any clothes except those he wore, and saying he was coming home to dinner, and he—he—"

She stopped as if her voice had failed her.

"And he does not come?" I prompted.

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She nodded, fumbling for her handkerchief in her bag.

"How long has he been gone?" I asked. I had heard exactly the same thing before, but to leave a woman like that, hardly more than a girl, and lovely!

"Ten days."

"I should think it ought to be looked into," I said decisively, and got up. Somehow I couldn't sit quietly. A lawyer who is worth anything is always a partisan, I suppose, and I never hear of a man deserting his wife that I am not indignant, the virtuous scorn of the unmarried man, perhaps. "But you will have to tell me more than that. Did this gentleman have any bad habits? That is, did he —er—drink?"

"Not to excess. He had been forbidden anything of that sort by his physician. He played bridge for money, but I—believe he was rather lucky." She colored uncomfortably.

"Married, I suppose?" I asked casually.

"He had been. His wife died when I—" She stopped and bit her lip. Then it was not her hus-

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band, after all! Oddly enough, the sun came out just at that moment, spilling a pool of sunlight at her feet, on the dusty rug with its tobacco-bitten scars.

"It is my father," she said simply. I was absurdly relieved.

But with the realization that I had not a case of desertion on my hands, I had to view the situation from a new angle.

"You are absolutely at a loss to account for his disappearance?"

"Absolutely."

"You have had no word from him?"

"None."

"He never went away before for any length of time, without telling you?"

"No. Never. He was away a great deal, but I always knew where to find him." Her voice broke again and her chin quivered. I thought it wise to reassure her.

"Don't let us worry about this until we are sure it is serious," I said. "Sometimes the things that seem most mysterious have the simplest explana-

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tions. He may have written and the letter have miscarried or—even a slight accident would account—" I saw I was blundering; she grew white and wide-eyed. "But, of course, that's unlikely too. He would have papers to identify him."

"His pockets were always full of envelopes and things like that," she assented eagerly.

"Don't you think I ought to know his name?" I asked. "It need not be known outside of the office, and this is a sort of confessional anyhow, or worse. People tell things to their lawyer that they wouldn't think of telling the priest."

Her color was slowly coming back, and she smiled.

"My name is Fleming, Margery Fleming," she said after a second's hesitation, "and my father, Mr. Allan Fleming, is the man. Oh, Mr. Knox, what are we going to do? He has been gone for more than a week!"

No wonder she had wished to conceal the identity of the missing man. So Allan Fleming was lost! A good many highly respectable citizens would hope that he might never be found. Fleming, state treas-

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urer, delightful companion, polished gentleman and successful politician of the criminal type. Outside in the corridor the office boy was singing under his breath. "Oh once there was a miller," he sang, "who lived in a mill." It brought back to my mind instantly the reform meeting at the city hall a year before, where for a few hours we had blown the feeble spark of protest against machine domination to a flame. We had sung a song to that very tune, and with this white-faced girl across from me, its words came back with revolting truth. It had been printed and circulated through the hall.

"Oh, once there was a capitol
That sat on a hill,
As it's too big to steal away
It's probably there still.
The ring's hand in the treasury
And Fleming with a sack.
They take it out in wagon loads
And never bring it back."

I put the song out of my mind with a shudder.

"I am more than sorry," I said. I was, too; whatever he may have been, he was *her* father. "And of

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course there are a number of reasons why this ought not to be known, for a time at least. After all, as I say, there may be a dozen simple explanations, and —there are exigencies in politics—"

"I hate politics!" she broke in suddenly. "The very name makes me ill. When I read of women wanting to—to vote and all that, I wonder if they know what it means to have to be polite to dreadful people, people who have even been convicts, and all that. Why, our last butler had been a prize fighter!" She sat upright with her hands on the arms of the chair. "That's another thing, too, Mr. Knox. The day after father went away, Carter left. And he has not come back."

"Carter was the butler?"

"Yes."

"A white man?"

"Oh, yes."

"And he left without giving you any warning?"

"Yes. He served luncheon the day after father went away, and the maids say he went away immediately after. He was not there that evening to serve dinner, but—he came back late that night, and

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got into the house, using his key to the servants' entrance. He slept there, the maids said, but he was gone before the servants were up and we have not seen him since."

I made a mental note of the butler.

"We'll go back to Carter again," I said. "Your father has not been ill, has he? I mean recently."

She considered.

"I can not think of anything except that he had a tooth pulled." She was quick to resent my smile. "Oh, I know I'm not helping you," she exclaimed, "but I have thought over everything until I can not think any more. I always end where I begin."

"You have not noticed any mental symptoms—any lack of memory?"

Her eyes filled.

"He forgot my birthday, two weeks ago," she said. "It was the first one he had ever forgotten, in nineteen of them."

Nineteen! Nineteen from thirty-five leaves sixteen!

"What I meant was this," I explained. "People sometimes have sudden and unaccountable lapses of

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memory and at those times they are apt to stray away from home. Has your father been worried lately?"

"He has not been himself at all. He has been irritable, even to me, and terrible to the servants. Only to Carter—he was never ugly to Carter. But I do not think it was a lapse of memory. When I remember how he looked that morning, I believe that he meant then to go away. It shows how he had changed, when he could think of going away without a word, and leaving me there alone."

"Then you have no brothers or sisters?"

"None. I came to you—" there she stopped.

"Please tell me how you happened to come to me," I urged. "I think you know that I am both honored and pleased."

"I didn't know where to go," she confessed, "so I took the telephone directory, the classified part under 'Attorneys,' and after I shut my eyes, I put my finger haphazard on the page. It pointed to your name."

I am afraid I flushed at this, but it was a wholesome douche. In a moment I laughed.

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"We will take it as an omen," I said, "and I will do all that I can. But I am not a detective, Miss Fleming. Don't you think we ought to have one?"

"Not the police!" she shuddered. "I thought you could do something without calling in a detective."

"Suppose you tell me what happened the day your father left, and how he went away. Tell me the little things too. They may be straws that will point in a certain direction."

"In the first place," she began, "we live on Monmouth Avenue. There are just the two of us, and the servants: a cook, two housemaids, a laundress, a butler and a chauffeur. My father spends much of his time at the capital, and in the last two years, since my old governess went back to Germany, at those times I usually go to mother's sisters at Bellwood—Miss Letitia and Miss Jane Maitland."

I nodded: I knew the Maitland ladies well. I had drawn four different wills for Miss Letitia in the last year.

"My father went away on the tenth of May. You say to tell you all about his going, but there is nothing to tell. We have a machine, but it was being re-

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paired. Father got up from breakfast, picked up his hat and walked out of the house. He was irritated at a letter he had read at the table—"

"Could you find that letter?" I asked quickly.

"He took it with him. I knew he was disturbed, for he did not even say he was going. He took a car, and I thought he was on his way to his office. He did not come home that night and I went to the office the next morning. The stenographer said he had not been there. He is not at Plattsburg, because they have been trying to call him from there on the long distance telephone every day."

In spite of her candid face I was sure she was holding something back.

"Why don't you tell me everything?" I asked. "You may be keeping back the one essential point."

She flushed. Then she opened her pocket-book and gave me a slip of rough paper. On it, in careless figures, was the number "eleven twenty-two." That was all.

"I was afraid you would think it silly," she said. "It was such a meaningless thing. You see, the second night after father left, I was nervous and could

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not sleep. I expected him home at any time and I kept listening for his step down-stairs. About three o'clock I was sure I heard some one in the room below mine—there was a creaking as if the person were walking carefully. I felt relieved, for I thought he had come back. But I did not hear the door into his bedroom close, and I got more and more wakeful. Finally I got up and slipped along the hall to his room. The door was open a few inches and I reached in and switched on the electric lights. I had a queer feeling before I turned on the light that there was some one standing close to me, but the room was empty, and the hall, too."

"And the paper?"

"When I saw the room was empty I went in. The paper had been pinned to a pillow on the bed. At first I thought it had been dropped or had blown there. When I saw the pin I was startled. I went back to my room and rang for Annie, the second housemaid, who is also a sort of personal maid of mine. It was half-past three o'clock when Annie came down. I took her into father's room and showed her the paper. She was sure it was not there

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when she folded back the bed clothes for the night at nine o'clock."

"Eleven twenty-two," I repeated. "Twice eleven is twenty-two. But that isn't very enlightening."

"No," she admitted. "I thought it might be a telephone number, and I called up all the eleven twenty-twos in the city."

In spite of myself, I laughed, and after a moment she smiled in sympathy.

"We are not brilliant, certainly," I said at last. "In the first place, Miss Fleming, if I thought the thing was very serious I would not laugh—but no doubt a day or two will see everything straight. But, to go back to this eleven twenty-two—did you rouse the servants and have the house searched?"

"Yes, Annie said Carter had come back and she went to waken him, but although his door was locked inside, he did not answer. Annie and I switched on all the lights on the lower floor from the top of the stairs. Then we went down together and looked around. Every window and door was locked, but in father's study, on the first floor, two drawers of his desk were standing open. And in the

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library, the little compartment in my writing-table, where I keep my house money, had been broken open and the money taken."

"Nothing else was gone?"

"Nothing. The silver on the sideboard in the dining-room, plenty of valuable things in the cabinet in the drawing-room—nothing was disturbed."

"It might have been Carter," I reflected. "Did he know where you kept your house money?"

"It is possible, but I hardly think so. Besides, if he was going to steal, there were so many more valuable things in the house. My mother's jewels as well as my own were in my dressing-room, and the door was not locked."

"They were not disturbed?"

She hesitated.

"They had been disturbed," she admitted. "My grandmother left each of her children some unstrung pearls. They were a hobby with her. Aunt Jane and Aunt Letitia never had theirs strung, but my mother's were made into different things, all old-fashioned. I left them locked in a drawer in my sitting-room, where I have always kept them. The

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following morning the drawer was unlocked and partly open, but nothing was missing."

"All your jewelry was there?"

"All but one ring, which I rarely remove from my finger." I followed her eyes. Under her glove was the outline of a ring, a solitaire stone.

"Nineteen from—" I shook myself together and got up.

"It does not sound like an ordinary burglary," I reflected. "But I am afraid I have no imagination. No doubt what you have told me would be meat and drink to a person with an analytical turn of mind. I can't deduct. Nineteen from thirty-five leaves sixteen, according to my mental process, although I know men who could make the difference nothing."

I believe she thought I was a little mad, for her face took on again its despairing look.

"We *must* find him, Mr. Knox," she insisted as she got up. "If you know of a detective that you can trust, please get him. But you can understand that the unexplained absence of the state treasurer must be kept secret. One thing I am sure of: he is being kept away. You don't know what enemies he

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has! Men like Mr. Schwartz, who have no scruples, no principle."

"Schwartz!" I repeated in surprise. Henry Schwartz was the boss of his party in the state; the man of whom one of his adversaries had said, with the distinct approval of the voting public, that he was so low in the scale of humanity that it would require a special dispensation of Heaven to raise him to the level of total degradation. But he and Fleming were generally supposed to be captain and first mate of the pirate craft that passed with us for the ship of state.

"Mr. Schwartz and my father are allies politically," the girl explained with heightened color, "but they are not friends. My father is a gentleman."

The inference I allowed to pass unnoticed, and as if she feared she had said too much, the girl rose. When she left, a few minutes later, it was with the promise that she would close the Monmouth Avenue house and go to her aunts at Bellwood, at once. For myself, I pledged a thorough search for her father, and began it by watching the scarlet wing on

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her hat through the top of the elevator cage until it had descended out of sight.

I am afraid it was a queer hodgepodge of clues and sentiment that I poured out to Hunter, the detective, when he came up late that afternoon.

Hunter was quiet when I finished my story.

"They're rotten clear through," he reflected. "This administration is worse than the last, and *it* was a peach. There have been more suicides than I could count on my two hands, in the last ten years. I warn you—you'd be better out of this mess."

"What do you think about the eleven twenty-two?" I asked as he got up and buttoned his coat.

"Well, it might mean almost anything. It might be that many dollars, or the time a train starts, or it might be the eleventh and the twenty-second letters of the alphabet—k—v."

"K—v!" I repeated. "Why that would be the Latin *cave*—beware."

Hunter smiled cheerfully.

"You'd better stick to the law, Mr. Knox," he said from the door. "We don't use Latin in the detective business."

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CHAPTER II

UNEASY APPREHENSIONS

PLATTSBURG was not the name of the capital, but it will do for this story. The state doesn't matter either. You may take your choice, like the story Mark Twain wrote, with all kinds of weather at the beginning, so the reader could take his pick.

We will say that my home city is Manchester. I live with my married brother, his wife and two boys. Fred is older than I am, and he is an exceptional brother. On the day he came home from his wedding trip, I went down with my traps on a hansom, in accordance with a prearranged schedule. Fred and Edith met me inside the door.

"Here's your latch-key, Jack," Fred said, as he shook hands. "Only one stipulation—remember we are strangers in the vicinity and try to get home before the neighbors are up. We have our reputations to think of."

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"There is no hour for breakfast," Edith said, as she kissed me. "You have a bath of your own, and don't smoke in the drawing-room."

Fred was always a lucky devil.

I had been there now for six years. I had helped to raise two young Knoxes—bully youngsters, too: the oldest one could use boxing-gloves when he was four—and the finest collie pup in our end of the state. I wanted to raise other things—the boys liked pets—but Edith was like all women, she didn't care for animals.

I had a rabbit-hutch built and stocked in the laundry, and a dove-cote on the roof. I used the general bath, and gave up my tub to a young alligator I got in Florida, and every Sunday the youngsters and I had a great time trying to teach it to do tricks. I have always taken it a little hard that Edith took advantage of my getting the measles from Billy, to clear out every animal in the house. She broke the news to me gently, the day the rash began to fade, maintaining that, having lost one cook through the alligator escaping from his tub and being mistaken, in the gloom of the back-stairs, for a

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rubber boot, and picked up under the same misapprehension, she could not risk another cook.

On the day that Margery Fleming came to me about her father, I went home in a state of mixed emotion. Dinner was not a quiet meal: Fred and I talked politics, generally, and as Fred was on one side and I on the other there was always an argument on.

"What about Fleming?" I asked at last, when Fred had declared that in these days of corruption, no matter what the government was, he was "forninst" it. "Hasn't he been frightened into reform?"

"Bad egg," he said, jabbing his potato as if it had been a politician, "and there's no way to improve a bad egg except to hold your nose. That's what the public is doing; holding its nose."

"Hasn't he a daughter?" I asked casually.

"Yes—a lovely girl, too," Edith assented. "It is his only redeeming quality."

"Fleming is a rascal, daughter or no daughter," Fred persisted. "Ever since he and his gang got poor Butler into trouble and then left him to kill himself as the only way out, I have felt that there

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was something coming to all of them—Hansen, Schwartz and the rest. I saw Fleming on the street to-day."

"What!" I exclaimed, almost jumping out of my chair.

Fred surveyed me quizzically over his coffee cup.

"'Hasn't he a daughter!'" he quoted. "Yes, I saw him, Jack, this very day, in an unromantic four-wheeler, and he was swearing at a policeman."

"Where was it?"

"Chestnut and Union. His cab had been struck by a car, and badly damaged, but the gentleman refused to get out. No doubt you could get the details from the corner-man."

"Look here, Fred," I said earnestly. "Keep that to yourself, will you? And you too, Edith? It's a queer story, and I'll tell you sometime."

As we left the dining-room Edith put her hand on my shoulder.

"Don't get mixed up with those people, Jack," she advised. "Margery's a dear girl, but her father practically killed Henry Butler, and Henry Butler married my cousin."

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"You needn't make it a family affair," I protested. "I have only seen the girl once."

But Edith smiled. "I know what I know," she said. "How extravagant of you to send Bobby that enormous hobby-horse!"

"The boy has to learn to ride sometime. In four years he can have a pony, and I'm going to see that he has it. He'll be eight by that time."

Edith laughed.

"In four years!" she said, "Why, in four years you'll—" then she stopped.

"I'll what?" I demanded, blocking the door to the library.

"You'll be forty, Jack, and it's a mighty unattractive man who gets past forty without being sought and won by some woman. You'll be buying—"

"I will be thirty-nine," I said with dignity, "and as far as being sought and won goes, I am so overwhelmed by Fred's misery that I don't intend to marry at all. If I do—*if I do*—it will be to some girl who turns and runs the other way every time she sees me."

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"The oldest trick in the box," Edith scoffed. "What's that thing Fred's always quoting: 'A woman is like a shadow; follow her, she flies; fly from her, she follows.'"

"Upon my word!" I said indignantly. "And you are a woman!"

"I'm different," she retorted. "I'm only a wife and mother."

In the library Fred got up from his desk and gathered up his papers. "I can't think with you two whispering there," he said, "I'm going to the den."

As he slammed the door into his workroom Edith picked up her skirts and scuttled after him.

"How dare you run away like that?" she called. "You promised me—" The door closed behind her.

I went over and spoke through the panels.

"'Follow her, she flies; fly from her, she follows'—oh, wife and mother!" I called.

"For Heaven's sake, Edith," Fred's voice rose irritably. "If you and Jack are going to talk all evening, go and sit on *his* knee and let me alone. The way you two flirt under my nose is a scandal. Do you hear that, Jack?"

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"Good night, Edith," I called, "I have left you a kiss on the upper left hand panel of the door. And I want to ask you one more question: what if I fly from the woman and she doesn't follow?"

"Thank your lucky stars," Fred called in a muffled voice, and I left them to themselves.

I had some work to do at the office, work that the interview with Hunter had interrupted, and half past eight that night found me at my desk. But my mind strayed from the papers before me. After a useless effort to concentrate, I gave it up as useless, and by ten o'clock I was on the street again, my evening wasted, the papers in the libel case of the *Star* against the *Eagle* untouched on my desk, and I the victim of an uneasy apprehension that took me, almost without volition, to the neighborhood of the Fleming house on Monmouth Avenue. For it had occurred to me that Miss Fleming might not have left the house that day as she had promised, might still be there, liable to another intrusion by the mysterious individual who had a key to the house.

It was a relief, consequently, when I reached its corner, to find no lights in the building. The girl

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had kept her word. Assured of that, I looked at the house curiously. It was one of the largest in the city, not wide, but running far back along the side street; a small yard with a low iron fence and a garage, completed the property. The street lights left the back of the house in shadow, and as I stopped in the shelter of the garage, I was positive that I heard some one working with a rear window of the empty house. A moment later the sounds ceased and muffled footsteps came down the cement walk. The intruder made no attempt to open the iron gate; against the light I saw him put a leg over the low fence, follow it up with the other, and start up the street, still with peculiar noiselessness of stride. He was a short, heavy-shouldered fellow in a cap, and his silhouette showed a prodigious length of arm.

I followed, I don't mind saying in some excitement. I had a vision of grabbing him from behind and leading him—or pushing him, under the circumstances, in triumph to the police station, and another mental picture, not so pleasant, of being found on the pavement by some passer-by, with a small punc-

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tuation mark ending my sentence of life. But I was not apprehensive. I even remember wondering humorously if I should overtake him and press the cold end of my silver mounted fountain pen into the nape of his neck, if he would throw up his hands and surrender. I had read somewhere of a burglar held up in a similar way with a shoe-horn.

Our pace was easy. Once the man just ahead stopped and lighted a cigarette, and the odor of a very fair Turkish tobacco came back to me. He glanced back over his shoulder at me and went on without quickening his pace. We met no policemen, and after perhaps five minutes walking, when the strain was growing tense, my gentleman of the rubber-soled shoes swung abruptly to the left, and—entered the police station!

I had occasion to see Davidson many times after that, during the strange development of the Fleming case; I had the peculiar experience later of having him follow me as I had trailed him that night, and I had occasion once to test the strength of his long arms when he helped to thrust me through the transom at the White Cat, but I never met him with-

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out a recurrence of the sheepish feeling with which I watched him swagger up to the night sergeant and fall into easy conversation with the man behind the desk. Standing in the glare from the open window, I had much the lost pride and self contempt of a wet cat sitting in the sun.

Two or three roundsmen were sitting against the wall, lazily, helmets off and coats open against the warmth of the early spring night. In a back room others were playing checkers and disputing noisily. Davidson's voice came distinctly through the open windows.

"The house is closed," he reported. "But one of the basement windows isn't shuttered and the lock is bad. I couldn't find Shields. He'd better keep an eye on it." He stopped and fished in his pockets with a grin. "This was tied to the knob of the kitchen door," he said, raising his voice for the benefit of the room, and holding aloft a piece of paper. "For Shields!" he explained, "and signed 'Delia.'"

The men gathered around him, even the sergeant got up and leaned forward, his elbows on his desk.

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"Read it," he said lazily. "Shields has got a wife, and her name ain't Delia."

"Dear Tom," Davidson read, in a mincing falsetto, "We are closing up unexpected, so I won't be here to-night. I am going to Mamie Brennan's and if you want to talk to me you can get me by calling up Anderson's drug-store. The clerk is a gentleman friend of mine. Mr. Carter, the butler, told me before he left he would get me a place as parlor maid, so I'll have another situation soon. Delia."

The sergeant scowled. "I'm goin' to talk to Tom," he said, reaching out for the note. "He's got a nice family, and things like that're bad for the force."

I lighted the cigar, which had been my excuse for loitering on the pavement, and went on. It sounded involved for a novice, but if I could find Anderson's drug-store I could find Mamie Brennan; through Mamie Brennan I would get Delia; and through Delia I might find Carter. I was vague from that point, but what Miss Fleming had said of Carter had made me suspicious of him. Under an arc light

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I made the first note in my new business of man-hunter and it was something like this:

Anderson's drug-store.

Ask for Mamie Brennan.

Find Delia.

Advise Delia that a policeman with a family is a bad bet.

Locate Carter.

It was late when I reached the corner of Chestnut and Union Streets, where Fred had said Allan Fleming had come to grief in a cab. But the corner-man had gone, and the night man on the beat knew nothing, of course, of any particular collision.

"There's plinty of 'em every day at this corner," he said cheerfully. "The department sinds a wagon here every night to gather up the pieces, autymobiles mainly. That trolley pole over there has been sliced off clean three times in the last month. They say a fellow ain't a graduate of the autymobile school till he can go around it on the sidewalk without hittin' it!"

I left him looking reminiscently at the pole, and went home to bed. I had made no headway, I

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had lost conceit with myself and a day and evening at the office, and I had gained the certainty that Margery Fleming was safe in Bellwood and the uncertain address of a servant who *might* know somethink about Mr. Fleming.

I was still awake at one o'clock and I got up impatiently and consulted the telephone directory. There were twelve Andersons in the city who conducted drug-stores.

When I finally went to sleep, I dreamed that I was driving Margery Fleming along a street in a broken taxicab, and that all the buildings were pharmacies and numbered eleven twenty-two.

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CHAPTER III

AFTER such a night I slept late. Edith still kept her honeymoon promise of no breakfast hour and she had gone out with Fred when I came down-stairs.

I have a great admiration for Edith, for her tolerance with my uncertain hours, for her cheery breakfast-room, and the smiling good nature of the servants she engages. I have a theory that, show me a sullen servant and I will show you a sullen mistress, although Edith herself disclaims all responsibility and lays credit for the smile with which Katie brings in my eggs and coffee, to largess on my part. Be that as it may, Katie is a smiling and personable young woman, and I am convinced that had she picked up the alligator on the back-stairs and lost part of the end of her thumb, she would have told Edith that she cut it off with the bread knife, and thus have saved to us Bessie the Beloved and her

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fascinating trick of taking the end of her tail in her mouth and spinning.

On that particular morning, Katie also brought me a letter, and I recognized the cramped and rather uncertain writing of Miss Jane Maitland.

"DEAR MR. KNOX:

"Sister Letitia wishes me to ask you if you can dine with us to-night, informally. She has changed her mind in regard to the Colored Orphans' Home, and would like to consult you about it.

"Very truly yours,

"SUSAN JANE MAITLAND."

It was a very commonplace note: I had had one like it after every board-meeting of the orphans' home, Miss Maitland being on principle an aggressive minority. Also, having considerable mind, changing it became almost as ponderous an operation as moving a barn, although not nearly so stable.

(Fred accuses me here of a very bad pun, and reminds me, quite undeservedly, that the pun is the lowest form of humor.)

I came across Miss Jane's letter the other day,

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when I was gathering the material for this narrative, and I sat for a time with it in my hand thinking over again the chain of events in which it had been the first link, a series of strange happenings that began with my acceptance of the invitation, and that led through ways as dark and tricks as vain as Bret Harte's Heathen Chinee ever dreamed of, to the final scene at the White Cat. With the letter I had filed away a half dozen articles and I ranged them all on the desk in front of me: the letter, the bit of paper with eleven twenty-two on it, that Margery gave me the first time I saw her; a note-book filled with jerky characters that looked like Arabic and were newspaper shorthand; a railroad schedule; a bullet, the latter slightly flattened; a cube-shaped piece of chalk which I put back in its box with a shudder, and labeled 'poison,' and a small gold buckle from a slipper, which I—at which I did not shudder.

I did not need to make the climaxes of my story. They lay before me.

I walked to the office that morning, and on the way I found and interviewed the corner-man at Chestnut and Union. But he was of small assist-

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ance. He remembered the incident, but the gentleman in the taxicab had not been hurt and refused to give his name, saying he was merely passing through the city from one railroad station to another, and did not wish any notoriety.

At eleven o'clock Hunter called up; he said he was going after the affair himself, but that it was hard to stick a dip net into the political puddle without pulling out a lot more than you went after, or than it was healthy to get. He was inclined to be facetious, and wanted to know if I had come across any more k. v's. Whereupon I put away the notes I had made about Delia and Mamie Brennan and I heard him chuckle as I rang off.

I went to Bellwood that evening. It was a suburban town a dozen miles from the city, with a picturesque station, surrounded by lawns and cement walks. Street-cars had so far failed to spoil its tree-bordered streets, and it was exclusive to the point of stagnation. The Maitland place was at the head of the main street, which had at one time been its drive. Miss Letitia, who was seventy, had had sufficient commercial instinct, some

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years before, to cut her ancestral acres—*their* ancestral acres, although Miss Jane hardly counted—into building lots, except perhaps an acre which surrounded the house. Thus, the Maitland ladies were reputed to be extremely wealthy. And as they never spent any money, no doubt they were.

The homestead as I knew it, was one of impeccable housekeeping and unmitigated gloom. There was a chill that rushed from the old-fashioned center hall to greet the new-comer on the porch, and that seemed to freeze up whatever in him was spontaneous and cheerful.

I had taken dinner at Bellwood before, and the memory was not hilarious. Miss Letitia was deaf, but chose to ignore the fact. With superb indifference she would break into the conversation with some wholly alien remark that necessitated a reassembling of one's ideas, making the meal a series of mental gymnastics. Miss Jane, through long practice, and because she only skimmed the surface of conversation, took her cerebral flights easily, but I am more unwieldy of mind.

Nor was Miss Letitia's dominance wholly conver-

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sational. Her sister Jane was her creature, alternately snubbed and bullied. To Miss Letitia, Jane, in spite of her sixty-five years, was still a child, and sometimes a bad one. Indeed many a child of ten is more sophisticated. Miss Letitia gave her expurgated books to read, and forbade her to read divorce court proceedings in the newspapers. Once, a recreant housemaid presenting the establishment with a healthy male infant, Jane was sent to the country for a month, and was only brought back when the house had been fumigated throughout.

Poor Miss Jane! She met me with fluttering cordiality in the hall that night, safe in being herself for once, with the knowledge that Miss Letitia always received me from a throne-like horsehair sofa in the back parlor. She wore a new lace cap, and was twitteringly excited.

"Our niece is here," she explained, as I took off my coat—everything was "ours" with Jane; "mine" with Letitia—"and we are having an ice at dinner. Please say that ices are not injurious, Mr. Knox. My sister is so opposed to them and I had to beg for this."

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"On the contrary, the doctors have ordered ices for my young nephews," I said gravely, "and I dote on them myself."

Miss Jane beamed. Indeed, there was something almost unnaturally gay about the little old lady all that evening. Perhaps it was the new lace cap. Later, I tried to analyze her manner, to recall exactly what she had said, to remember anything that could possibly help. But I could find no clue to what followed.

Miss Letitia received me as usual, in the back parlor. Miss Fleming was there also, sewing by a window, and in her straight white dress with her hair drawn back and braided around her head, she looked even younger than before. There was no time for conversation. Miss Letitia launched at once into the extravagance of both molasses and butter on the colored orphans' bread and after a glance at me, and a quick comprehension from my face that I had no news for her, the girl at the window bent over her sewing again.

"Molasses breeds worms," Miss Letitia said decisively. "So does pork. And yet those children

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think Heaven means ham and molasses three times a day."

"You have had no news at all?" Miss Fleming said cautiously, her head bent over her work.

"None," I returned, under cover of the table linen to which Miss Letitia's mind had veered. "I have a good man working on it." As she glanced at me questioningly, "It needed a detective, Miss Fleming." Evidently another day without news had lessened her distrust of the police, for she nodded acquiescence and went on with her sewing. Miss Letitia's monotonous monologue went on, and I gave it such attention as I might. For the lamps had been lighted, and with every movement of the girl across, I could see the gleaming of a diamond on her engagement finger.

"If I didn't watch her, Jane would ruin them," said Miss Letitia. "She gives 'em apples when they keep their faces clean, and the bills for soap have gone up double. Soap once a day's enough for a colored child. Do you smell anything burning, Knox?"

I sniffed and lied, whereupon Miss Letitia swept

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her black silk, her colored orphans and her majestic presence out of the room. As the door closed, Miss Fleming put down her sewing and rose. For the first time I saw how weary she looked.

"I do not dare to tell them, Mr. Knox," she said. "They are old, and they hate him anyhow. I couldn't sleep last night. Suppose he should have gone back, and found the house closed!"

"He would telephone here at once, wouldn't he?" I suggested.

"I suppose so, yes." She took up her sewing from the chair with a sigh. "But I'm afraid he won't come—not soon. I have hemmed tea towels for Aunt Letitia to-day until I am frantic, and all day I have been wondering over something you said yesterday. You said, you remember, that you were not a detective, that some men could take nineteen from thirty-five and leave nothing. What did you mean?"

I was speechless for a moment.

"The fact is—I—you see," I blundered, "it was a—merely a figure of speech, a—speech of figures is more accurate, —" And then dinner was announced and I was saved. But although she said little or

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nothing during the meal, I caught her looking across at me once or twice in a bewildered, puzzled fashion. I could fairly see her revolving my detestable figures in her mind.

Miss Letitia presided over the table in garrulous majesty. The two old ladies picked at their food, and Miss Jane had a spot of pink in each withered cheek. Margery Fleming made a brave pretense, but left her plate almost untouched. As for me, I ate a substantial masculine meal and half apologized for my appetite, but Letitia did not hear. She tore the board of managers to shreds with the roast, and denounced them with the salad. But Jane was all anxious hospitality.

"Please *do* eat your dinner," she whispered. "I made the salad myself. And I know what it takes to keep a big man going. Harry eats more than Letitia and I together. Doesn't he, Margery?"

"Harry?" I asked.

"Mrs. Stevens is an unmitigated fool. I said if they elected her president I'd not leave a penny to the home. That's why I sent for you, Knox." And to the maid, "Tell Heppie to wash those cups in

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luke-warm water. They're the best ones. And not to drink her coffee out of them. She let her teeth slip and bit a piece out of one the last time."

Miss Jane leaned forward to me after a smiling glance at her niece across.

"Harry Wardrop, a cousin's son, and—" she patted Margery's hand with its ring—"soon to be something closer."

The girl's face colored, but she returned Miss Jane's gentle pressure.

"They put up an iron fence," Miss Letitia reverted somberly to her grievance, "when a wooden one would have done. It was extravagance, ruinous extravagance."

"Harry stays with us when he is in Manchester," Miss Jane went on, nodding brightly across at Letitia as if she, too, were damning the executive board. "Lately, he has been almost all the time in Plattsburg. He is secretary to Margery's father. It is a position of considerable responsibility, and we are very proud of him."

I had expected something of the sort, but the remainder of the meal had somehow lost its savor.

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There was a lull in the conversation while dessert was being brought in. Miss Jane sat quivering, watching her sister's face for signs of trouble; the latter had subsided into muttered grumbling, and Miss Fleming sat, one hand on the table, staring absently at her engagement ring.

"You look like a fool in that cap, Jane," volunteered Letitia, while the plates were being brought in. "What's for dessert?"

"Ice-cream," called Miss Jane, over the table.

"Well, you needn't," snapped Letitia, "I can hear you well enough. You told me it was junket."

"I said ice-cream, and you said it would be all right," poor Jane shrieked. "If you drink a cup of hot water after it, it won't hurt you."

"Fiddle," Letitia snapped unpleasantly. "I'm not going to freeze my stomach and then thaw it out like a drain pipe. Tell Heppie to put my ice-cream on the stove."

So we waited until Miss Letitia's had been heated, and was brought in, sicklied over with pale hues, not of thought, but of confectioners' dyes. Miss Letitia ate it resignedly. "Like as not I'll

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break out, I did the last time," she said gloomily. "I only hope I don't break out in colors."

The meal was over finally, but if I had hoped for another word alone with Margery Fleming that evening, I was foredoomed to disappointment. Letitia sent the girl, not ungently, to bed, and ordered Jane out of the room with a single curt gesture toward the door.

"You'd better wash those cups yourself, Jane," she said. "I don't see any sense anyhow in getting out the best china unless there's real company. Besides, I'm going to talk business."

Poor, meek, spiritless Miss Jane! The situation was absurd in spite of its pathos. She confided to me once that never in her sixty-five years of life had she bought herself a gown, or chosen the dinner. She was snubbed with painstaking perseverance, and sent out of the room when subjects requiring frank handling were under discussion. She was as unsophisticated as a child of ten, as unworldly as a baby, as —well, poor Miss Jane, again.

When the door had closed behind her, Miss Letitia listened for a moment, got up suddenly and crossing

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the room with amazing swiftness for her years, pounced on the knob and threw it open again. But the passage was empty; Miss Jane's slim little figure was disappearing into the kitchen. The older sister watched her out of sight, and then returned to her sofa without deigning explanation.

"I didn't want to see you about the will, Mr. Knox," she began without prelude. "The will can wait. I ain't going to die just yet—not if I know anything. But although I think you'd look a heap better and more responsible if you wore some hair on your face, still in most things I think you're a man of sense. And you're not too young. That's why I didn't send for Harry Wardrop; he's too young."

I winced at that. Miss Letitia leaned forward and put her bony hand on my knee.

"I've been robbed," she announced in a half whisper, and straightened to watch the effect of her words.

"Indeed!" I said, properly thunderstruck. I *was* surprised. I had always believed that only the use of the fourth dimension in space would enable any

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one, not desired, to gain access to the Maitland house. "Of money?"

"Not money, although I had a good bit in the house." This also I knew. It was said of Miss Letitia that when money came into her possession it went out of circulation.

"Not—the pearls?" I asked.

She answered my question with another.

"When you had those pearls appraised for me at the jewelers last year, how many were there?"

"Not quite one hundred. I think—yes, ninety-eight."

"Exactly," she corroborated, in triumph. "They belonged to my mother. Margery's mother got some of them. That's a good many years ago, young man. They are worth more than they were then—a great deal more."

"Twenty-two thousand dollars," I repeated. "You remember, Miss Letitia, that I protested vigorously at the time against your keeping them in the house."

Miss Letitia ignored this, but before she went on she repeated again her cat-like pouncing at the door,

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only to find the hall empty as before. This time when she sat down it was knee to knee with me.

"Yesterday morning," she said gravely, "I got down the box; they have always been kept in the small safe in the top of my closet. When Jane found a picture of my niece, Margery Fleming, in Harry's room, I thought it likely there was some truth in the gossip Jane heard about the two, and—if there was going to be a wedding—why, the pearls were to go to Margery anyhow. But—I found the door of the safe unlocked and a little bit open—and ten of the pearls were gone!"

"Gone!" I echoed. "Ten of them! Why, it's ridiculous! If ten, why not the whole ninety-eight?"

"How do I know?" she replied with asperity. "That's what I keep a lawyer for: that's why I sent for you."

For the second time in two days I protested the same thing.

"But you need a detective," I cried. "If you can find the thief I will be glad to send him where he ought to be, but I couldn't find him."

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"I will not have the police," she persisted inflexibly. "They will come around asking impertinent questions, and telling the newspapers that a foolish old woman had got what she deserved."

"Then you are going to send them to a bank?"

"You have less sense than I thought," she snapped. "I am going to leave them where they are, and watch. Whoever took the ten will be back for more, mark my words."

"I don't advise it," I said decidedly. "You have most of them now, and you might easily lose them all; not only that, but it is not safe for you or your sister."

"Stuff and nonsense!" the old lady said, with spirit. "As for Jane, she doesn't even know they are gone. I know who did it. It was the new housemaid, Bella MacKenzie. Nobody else could get in. I lock up the house myself at night, and I'm in the habit of doing a pretty thorough job of it. They went in the last three weeks, for I counted them Saturday three weeks ago myself. The only persons in the house in that time, except ourselves, were Harry, Bella and Hepsibah, who's been

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here for forty years and wouldn't know a pearl from a pickled onion."

"Then—what do you want me to do?" I asked.

"Have Bella arrested and her trunk searched?"

I felt myself shrinking in the old lady's esteem every minute.

"Her trunk!" she said scornfully. "I turned it inside out this morning, pretending I thought she was stealing the laundry soap. Like as not she has them buried in the vegetable garden. What I want you to do is to stay here for three or four nights, to be on hand. When I catch the thief, I want my lawyer right by."

It ended by my consenting, of course. Miss Letitia was seldom refused. I telephoned to Fred that I would not be home, listened for voices and decided Margery Fleming had gone to bed. Miss Jane lighted me to the door of the guest room, and saw that everything was comfortable. Her thin gray curls bobbed as she examined the water pitcher, saw to the towels, and felt the bed linen for dampness. At the door she stopped and turned around timidly.

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"Has—has anything happened to disturb my sister?" she asked. "She—has been almost irritable all day."

Almost!

"She is worried about her colored orphans," I evaded. "She does not approve of fireworks for them on the fourth of July."

Miss Jane was satisfied. I watched her little, old, black-robed figure go lightly down the hall. Then I bolted the door, opened all the windows, and proceeded to a surreptitious smoke.

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CHAPTER IV

A THIEF IN THE NIGHT

THE windows being wide open, it was not long before a great moth came whirring in. He hurled himself at the light and then, dazzled and singed, began to beat with noisy thumps against the barrier of the ceiling. Finding no egress there, he was back at the lamp again, whirling in dizzy circles until at last, worn out, he dropped to the table, where he lay on his back, kicking impotently.

The room began to fill with tiny winged creatures that flung themselves headlong to destruction, so I put out the light and sat down near the window, with my cigar and my thoughts.

Miss Letitia's troubles I dismissed shortly. While it was odd that only ten pearls should have been taken, still—in every other way it bore the marks of an ordinary theft. The thief might have thought that by leaving the majority of the gems he could

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postpone discovery indefinitely. But the Fleming case was of a different order. Taken by itself, Fleming's disappearance could have been easily accounted for. There must be times in the lives of all unscrupulous individuals when they feel the need of retiring temporarily from the public eye. But the intrusion into the Fleming home, the ransacked desk and the broken money drawer—most of all, the bit of paper with eleven twenty-two on it—here was a hurdle my legal mind refused to take.

I had finished my second cigar, and was growing more and more wakeful, when I heard a footstep on the path around the house. It was black outside; when I looked out, as I did cautiously, I could not see even the gray-white of the cement walk. The steps had ceased, but there was a sound of fumbling at one of the shutters below. The catch clicked twice, as if some thin instrument was being slipped underneath to raise it, and once I caught a muttered exclamation.

I drew in my head and, puffing my cigar until it was glowing, managed by its light to see that it was a quarter to two. When I listened again, the

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house-breaker had moved to another window, and was shaking it cautiously.

With Miss Letitia's story of the pearls fresh in my mind, I felt at once that the thief, finding his ten a prize, had come back for more. My first impulse was to go to the head of my bed, where I am accustomed to keep a revolver. With the touch of the tall corner post, however, I remembered that I was not at home, and that it was not likely there was a weapon in the house.

Finally, after knocking over an ornament that shattered on the hearth and sounded like the crash of doom, I found on the mantel a heavy brass candlestick, and with it in my hand I stepped into the gloom of the hallway and felt my way to the stairs.

There were no night lights; the darkness was total. I found the stairs before I expected to, and came within an ace of pitching down, headlong. I had kicked off my shoes—a fact which I regretted later. Once down the stairs I was on more familiar territory. I went at once into the library, which was beneath my room, but the sounds at the window had ceased. I thought I heard steps on the walk,

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going toward the front of the house. I wheeled quickly and started for the door, when something struck me a terrific blow on the nose. I reeled back and sat down, dizzy and shocked. It was only when no second blow followed the first that I realized what had occurred.

With my two hands out before me in the blackness, I had groped, one hand on either side of the open door, which of course I had struck violently with my nose. Afterward I found it had bled considerably, and my collar and tie must have added to my ghastly appearance.

My candlestick had rolled under the table, and after crawling around on my hands and knees, I found it. I had lost, I suppose, three or four minutes, and I was raging at my awkwardness and stupidity. No one, however, seemed to have heard the noise. For all her boasted watchfulness, Miss Letitia must have been asleep. I got back into the hall and from there to the dining-room. Some one was fumbling at the shutters there, and as I looked they swung open. It was so dark outside, with the trees and the distance from the street, that only the

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creaking of the shutter told it had opened. I stood in the middle of the room, with one hand firmly clutching my candlestick.

But the window refused to move. The burglar seemed to have no proper tools; he got something under the sash, but it snapped, and through the heavy plate-glass I could hear him swearing. Then he abruptly left the window and made for the front of the house.

I blundered in the same direction, my unshod feet striking on projecting furniture and causing me agonies, even through my excitement. When I reached the front door, however, I was amazed to find it unlocked, and standing open perhaps an inch. I stopped uncertainly. I was in a peculiar position; not even the most ardent admirers of antique brass candlesticks indorse them as weapons of offense or defense. But, there seeming to be nothing else to do, I opened the door quietly and stepped out into the darkness.

The next instant I was flung heavily to the porch floor. I am not a small man by any means, but under the fury of that onslaught I was a child. It was

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a porch chair, I think, that knocked me senseless; I know I folded up like a jack-knife, and that was all I did know for a few minutes.

When I came to I was lying where I had fallen, and a candle was burning beside me on the porch floor. It took me a minute to remember, and another minute to realize that I was looking into the barrel of a revolver. It occurred to me that I had never seen a more villainous face than that of the man who held it—which shows my state of mind—and that my position was the reverse of comfortable. Then the man behind the gun spoke.

"What did you do with that bag?" he demanded, and I felt his knee on my chest.

"What bag?" I inquired feebly. My head was jumping, and the candle was a volcanic eruption of sparks and smoke.

"Don't be a fool," the gentleman with the revolver persisted. "If I don't get that bag within five minutes, I'll fill you as full of holes as a cheese."

"I haven't seen any bag," I said stupidly. "What sort of bag?" I heard my own voice, drunk from the shock. "Paper bag, laundry bag—"

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"You've hidden it in the house," he said, bringing the revolver a little closer with every word. My senses came back with a jerk and I struggled to free myself.

"Go in and look," I responded. "Let me up from here, and I'll take you in myself."

The man's face was a study in amazement and anger.

"You'll take me in! You!" He got up without changing the menacing position of the gun. "You walk in there—here, carry the candle—and take me to that bag. Quick, do you hear?"

I was too bewildered to struggle. I got up dizzily, but when I tried to stoop for the candle I almost fell on it. My head cleared after a moment, and when I had picked up the candle I had a good chance to look at my assailant. He was staring at me, too. He was a young fellow, well dressed, and haggard beyond belief.

"I don't know anything about a bag," I persisted, "but if you will give me your word there was nothing in it belonging to this house, I will take you in and let you look for it."

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The next moment he had lowered the revolver and clutched my arm.

"Who in the devil's name *are* you?" he asked wildly.

I think the thing dawned on us both at the same moment.

"My name is Knox," I said coolly, feeling for my handkerchief—my head was bleeding from a cut over the ear—"John Knox."

"Knox!" Instead of showing relief, his manner showed greater consternation than ever. He snatched the candle from me and, holding it up, searched my face. "Then—good God—where is my traveling-bag?"

"I have something in my head where you hit me," I said. "Perhaps that is it."

But my sarcasm was lost on him.

"I am Harry Wardrop," he said, "and I have been robbed, Mr. Knox. I was trying to get in the house without waking the family, and when I came back here to the front door, where I had left my valise, it was gone. I thought you were the thief when you

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came out, and—we've lost all this time. Somebody has followed me and robbed me!"

"What was in the bag?" I asked, stepping to the edge of the porch and looking around, with the help of the candle.

"Valuable papers," he said shortly. He seemed to be dazed and at a loss what to do next. We had both instinctively kept our voices low.

"You are certain you left it here?" I asked. The thing seemed incredible in the quiet and peace of that neighborhood.

"Where you are standing."

Once more I began a desultory search, going down the steps and looking among the cannas that bordered the porch. Something glistened beside the step, and stooping down I discovered a small brown leather traveling-bag, apparently quite new.

"Here it is," I said, not so gracious as I might have been; I had suffered considerably for that traveling-bag. The sight of it restored Wardrop's poise at once. His twitching features relaxed.

"By Jove, I'm glad to see it," he said. "I can't

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explain, but—tremendous things were depending on that bag, Mr. Knox. I don't know how to apologize to you; I must have nearly brained you."

"You did," I said grimly, and gave him the bag. The moment he took it I knew there was something wrong; he hurried into the house and lighted the library lamp. Then he opened the traveling-bag with shaking fingers. It was empty!

He stood for a moment, staring incredulously into it. Then he hurled it down on the table and turned on me, as I stood beside him.

"It's a trick!" he said furiously. "You've hidden it somewhere. This is not my bag. You've substituted one just like it."

"Don't be a fool," I retorted. "How could I substitute an empty satchel for yours when up to fifteen minutes ago I had never seen you or your grip either? Use a little common sense. Some place tonight you have put down that bag, and some clever thief has substituted a similar one. It's an old trick."

He dropped into a chair and buried his face in his hands.

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"It's impossible," he said after a pause, while he seemed to be going over, minute by minute, the events of the night. "I was followed, as far as that goes, in Plattsburg. Two men watched me from the minute I got there, on Tuesday; I changed my hotel, and for all of yesterday—Wednesday, that is—I felt secure enough. But on my way to the train I felt that I was under surveillance again, and by turning quickly I came face to face with one of the men."

"Would you know him?" I asked.

"Yes. I thought he was a detective; you know I've had a lot of that sort of thing lately, with election coming on. He didn't get on the train, however."

"But the other one may have done so."

"Yes, the other one may. The thing I don't understand is this, Mr. Knox. When we drew in at Bellwood Station I distinctly remember opening the bag and putting my newspaper and railroad schedule inside. It was the right bag then; my clothing was in it, and my brushes."

I had been examining the empty bag as he talked.

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"Where did you put your railroad schedule?" I asked.

"In the leather pocket at the side."

"It is here," I said, drawing out the yellow folder. For a moment my companion looked almost haunted. He pressed his hands to his head and began to pace the room like a crazy man.

"The whole thing is impossible. I tell you, that valise was heavy when I walked up from the station. I changed it from one hand to the other because of the weight. When I got here I set it down on the edge of the porch and tried the door. When I found it locked—"

"But it wasn't locked," I broke in. "When I came down-stairs to look for a burglar, I found it open at least an inch."

He stopped in his pacing up and down, and looked at me curiously.

"We're both crazy, then," he asserted gravely. "I tell you, I tried every way I knew to unlock that door, and could hear the chain rattling. Unlocked! You don't know the way this house is fastened up at night."

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"Nevertheless, it was unlocked when I came down."

We were so engrossed that neither of us had heard steps on the stairs. The sound of a smothered exclamation from the doorway caused us both to turn suddenly. Standing there, in a loose gown of some sort, very much surprised and startled, was Margery Fleming. Wardrop pulled himself together at once. As for me, I knew what sort of figure I cut, my collar stained with blood, a lump on my forehead that felt as big as a door-knob, and no shoes.

"What *is* the matter?" she asked uncertainly. "I heard such queer noises, and I thought some one had broken into the house."

"Mr. Wardrop was trying to break in," I explained, "and I heard him and came down. On the way I had a bloody encounter with an open door, in which I came out the loser."

I don't think she quite believed me. She looked from my swollen head to the open bag, and then to Wardrop's pale face. Then I think, woman-like, she remembered the two great braids that hung

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over her shoulders and the dressing-gown she wore, for she backed precipitately into the hall.

"I'm glad that's all it is," she called back cautiously, and we could hear her running up the stairs.

"You'd better go to bed," Wardrop said, picking up his hat. "I'm going down to the station. There's no train out of here between midnight and a flag train at four-thirty A. M. It's not likely to be of any use, but I want to see who goes on that train."

"It is only half past two," I said, glancing at my watch. "We might look around outside first."

The necessity for action made him welcome any suggestion. Reticent as he was, his feverish excitement made me think that something vital hung on the recovery of the contents of that Russia leather bag. We found a lantern somewhere in the back of the house, and together we went over the grounds. It did not take long, and we found nothing.

As I look back on that night, the key to what had passed and to much that was coming was so simple, so direct—and yet we missed it entirely. Nor,

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when bigger things developed, and Hunter's trained senses were brought into play, did he do much better. It was some time before we learned the true inwardness of the events of that night.

At five o'clock in the morning Wardrop came back exhausted and nerveless. No one had taken the four-thirty; the contents of the bag were gone, probably beyond recall. I put my dented candlestick back on the mantel, and prepared for a little sleep, blessing the deafness of old age which had enabled the Maitland ladies to sleep through it all.

I tried to forget the queer events of the night, but the throbbing of my head kept me awake, and through it all one question obtruded itself—who had unlocked the front door and left it open?

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CHAPTER V.

I WAS almost unrecognizable when I looked at myself in the mirror the next morning, preparatory to dressing for breakfast. My nose boasted a new arch, like the back of an angry cat, making my profile Roman and ferocious, and the lump on my forehead from the chair was swollen, glassy and purple. I turned my back to the mirror and dressed in wrathful irritation and my yesterday's linen.

Miss Fleming was in the breakfast-room when I got down, standing at a window, her back to me. I have carried with me, during all the months since that time, a mental picture of her as she stood there, in a pink morning frock of some sort. But only the other day, having mentioned this to her, she assured me that the frock was blue, that she didn't have a pink garment at the time this story opens and that if she did she positively didn't have it on. And having thus flouted my eye for color, she maintains that

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she did *not* have her back to me, for she distinctly saw my newly-raised bridge as I came down the stairs. So I amend this. Miss Fleming in a blue frock was facing the door when I went into the breakfast-room. Of one thing I am certain. She came forward and held out her hand.

"Good morning," she said. "What a terrible face!"

"It isn't mine," I replied meekly. "My own face is beneath these excrescences. I tried to cover the bump on my forehead with French chalk, but it only accentuated the thing, like snow on a mountain top."

"'The purple peaks of Darien,'" she quoted, pouring me my coffee. "Do you know, I feel so much better since you have taken hold of things. Aunt Letitia thinks you are wonderful."

I thought ruefully of the failure of my first attempt to play the sleuth, and I disclaimed any right to Miss Letitia's high opinion of me. From my dogging the watchman to the police station, to Delia and her note, was a short mental step.

"Before any one comes down, Miss Fleming," I said, "I want to ask a question or two. What was

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the name of the maid who helped you search the house that night?"

"Annie."

"What other maids did you say there were?"

"Delia and Rose."

"Do you know anything about them? Where they came from, or where they went?"

She smiled a little.

"What does one know about new servants?" she responded. "They bring you references, but references are the price most women pay to get rid of their servants without a fuss. Rose was fat and old, but Delia was pretty. I thought she rather liked Carter."

Carter as well as Shields, the policeman. I put Miss Delia down as a flirt.

"And you have no idea where Carter went?"

"None."

Wardrop came in then, and we spoke of other things. The two elderly ladies it seemed had tea and toast in their rooms when they wakened, and the three of us breakfasted together. But conversation languished with Wardrop's appearance; he looked

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haggard and worn, avoided Miss Fleming's eyes, and after ordering eggs instead of his chop, looked at his watch and left without touching anything.

"I want to get the nine-thirty, Margie," he said, coming back with his hat in his hand. "I may not be out to dinner. Tell Miss Letitia, will you?" He turned to go, but on second thought came back to me and held out his hand.

"I may not see you again," he began.

"Not if I see you first," I interrupted. He glanced at my mutilated features and smiled.

"I have made you a Maitland," he said. "I didn't think that anything but a prodigal Nature could duplicate Miss Letitia's nose! I'm honestly sorry, Mr. Knox, and if you do not want Miss Jane at that bump with a cold silver knife and some butter, you'd better duck before she comes down. Good-by, Margie."

I think the girl was as much baffled as I was by the change in his manner when he spoke to her. His smile faded and he hardly met her eyes: I thought that his aloofness puzzled rather than hurt her. When the house door had closed behind him, she

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dropped her chin in her hand and looked across the table.

"You did not tell me the truth last night, Mr. Knox," she said. "I have never seen Harry look like that. Something has happened to him."

"He was robbed of his traveling-bag," I explained, on Fred's theory that half a truth is better than a poor lie. "It's a humiliating experience, I believe. A man will throw away thousands, or gamble them away, with more equanimity than he'll see some one making off with his hair brushes or his clean collars."

"His traveling-bag!" she repeated scornfully. "Mr. Knox, something has happened to my father, and you and Harry are hiding it from me."

"On my honor, it is nothing of the sort," I hastened to assure her. "I saw him for only a few minutes, just long enough for him to wreck my appearance."

"He did not speak of father?"

"No."

She got up and crossing to the wooden mantel, put her arms upon it and leaned her head against

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them. "I wanted to ask him," she said drearily, "but I am afraid to. Suppose he doesn't know and I should tell him! He would go to Mr. Schwartz at once, and Mr. Schwartz is treacherous. The papers would get it, too."

Her eyes filled with tears, and I felt as awkward as a man always does when a woman begins to cry. If he knows her well enough he can go over and pat her on the shoulder and assure her it is going to be all right. If he does not know her, and there are two maiden aunts likely to come in at any minute, he sits still, as I did, and waits until the storm clears.

Miss Margery was not long in emerging from her handkerchief.

"I didn't sleep much," she explained, dabbing at her eyes, "and I am nervous, anyhow. Mr. Knox, are you sure it was only Harry trying to get into the house last night?"

"Only Harry," I repeated. "If Mr. Wardrop's attempt to get into the house leaves me in this condition, what would a real burglar have done to me!"

She was too intent to be sympathetic over my disfigured face.

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"There was some one moving about up-stairs not long before I came down," she said slowly.

"You heard me; I almost fell down the stairs."

"Did you brush past my door, and strike the knob?" she demanded.

"No, I was not near any door."

"Very well," triumphantly. "Some one did. Not only that, but they were in the store-room on the floor above. I could hear one person and perhaps two, going from one side of the room to the other and back again."

"You heard a goblin quadrille. First couple forward and back," I said facetiously.

"I heard real footsteps—unmistakable ones. The maids sleep back on the second floor, and—don't tell me it was rats. There are no rats in my Aunt Letitia's house."

I was more impressed than I cared to show. I found I had a half hour before train time, and as we were neither of us eating anything, I suggested that we explore the upper floor of the house. I did it, I explained, not because I expected to find anything, but because I was sure we would not.

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We crept past the two closed doors behind which the ladies Maitland were presumably taking out their crimps and taking in their tea. Then up a narrow, obtrusively clean stairway to the upper floor.

It was an old-fashioned, sloping-roofed attic, with narrow windows and a bare floor. At one end a door opened into a large room, and in there were the family trunks of four generations of Maitlands. One on another they were all piled there—little hair trunks, squab-topped trunks, huge Saratogas—of the period when the two maiden ladies were in their late teens—and there were handsome, modern trunks, too. For Miss Fleming's satisfaction I made an examination of the room, but it showed nothing. There was little or no dust to have been disturbed; the windows were closed and locked.

In the main attic were two step-ladders, some curtains drying on frames and an old chest of drawers with glass knobs and the veneering broken in places. One of the drawers stood open, and inside could be seen a red and white patchwork quilt, and a grayish thing that looked like flannel and smelled to heaven of camphor. We gave up finally, and started down.

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Part way down the attic stairs Margery stopped, her eyes fixed on the white-scrubbed rail. Following her gaze, I stopped, too, and I felt a sort of chill go over me. No spot or blemish, no dirty finger print marked the whiteness of that stair rail, except in one place. On it, clear and distinct, every line of the palm showing, was the reddish imprint of a hand!

Margery did not speak; she had turned very white, and closed her eyes, but she was not faint. When the first revulsion had passed, I reached over and touched the stain. It was quite dry, of course, but it was still reddish-brown; another hour or two would see it black. It was evidently fresh—Hunter said afterward it must have been about six hours old, and as things transpired, he was right. The stain showed a hand somewhat short and broad, with widened finger-tips; marked in ink, it would not have struck me so forcibly, perhaps, but there, its ugly red against the white wood, it seemed to me to be the imprint of a brutal, murderous hand.

Margery was essentially feminine.

"What did I tell you?" she asked. "Some one

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was in this house last night; I heard them distinctly. There must have been two, and they quarreled—" she shuddered.

We went on down-stairs into the quiet and peace of the dining-room again. I got some hot coffee for Margery, for she looked shaken, and found I had missed my train.

"I am beginning to think I am being pursued by a malicious spirit," she said, trying to smile. "I came away from home because people got into the house at night and left queer signs of their visits, and now, here at Bellwood, where nothing *ever* happens, the moment I arrive things begin to occur. And—just as it was at home—the house was so well locked last night."

I did not tell her of the open hall door, just as I had kept from her the fact that only the contents of Harry Wardrop's bag had been taken. That it had all been the work of one person, and that that person, having in some way access to the house, had also stolen the pearls, was now my confident belief.

I looked at Bella—the maid—as she moved around the dining-room; her stolid face was not

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even intelligent; certainly not cunning. Heppie, the cook and only other servant, was partly blind and her horizon was the diameter of her largest kettle. No—it had not been a servant, this mysterious intruder who passed the Maitland silver on the sideboard without an attempt to take it, and who floundered around an attic at night, in search of nothing more valuable than patchwork quilts and winter flannels. It is strange to look back and think how quietly we sat there; that we could see nothing but burglary—or an attempt at it—in what we had found.

It must have been after nine o'clock when Bella came running into the room. Ordinarily a slow and clumsy creature, she almost flew. She had a tray in her hand, and the dishes were rattling and threatening overthrow at every step. She brought up against a chair, and a cup went flying. The breaking of a cup must have been a serious offense in Miss Letitia Maitland's house, but Bella took no notice whatever of it.

"Miss Jane," she gasped, "Miss Jane, she's—she's—"

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"Hurt!" Margery exclaimed, rising and clutching at the table for support.

"No. Gone—she's gone! She's been run off with!"

"Nonsense!" I said, seeing Margery's horrified face. "Don't come in here with such a story. If Miss Jane is not in her room, she is somewhere else, that's all."

Bella stooped and gathered up the broken cup, her lips moving. Margery had recovered herself. She made Bella straighten and explain.

"Do you mean—she is not in her room?" she asked incredulously. "Isn't she somewhere around the house?"

"Go up and look at the room," the girl replied, and, with Margery leading, we ran up the stairs.

Miss Jane's room was empty. From somewhere near Miss Letitia could be heard lecturing Hepsibah about putting too much butter on the toast. Her high voice, pitched for Heppie's old ears, rasped me. Margery closed the door, and we surveyed the room together.

The bed had been occupied; its coverings had

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been thrown back, as if its occupant had risen hurriedly. The room itself was in a state of confusion; a rocker lay on its side, and Miss Jane's clothing, folded as she had taken it off, had slid off on to the floor. Her shoes stood neatly at the foot of the bed, and a bottle of toilet vinegar had been upset, pouring a stream over the marble top of the dresser and down on to the floor. Over the high wooden mantel the Maitland who had been governor of the state years ago hung at a waggish angle, and a clock had been pushed aside and stopped at half-past one.

Margery stared around her in bewilderment. Of course, it was not until later in the day that I saw all the details. My first impression was of confusion and disorder: the room seemed to have been the scene of a struggle. The overturned furniture, the clothes on the floor, the picture, coupled with the print of the hand on the staircase and Miss Jane's disappearance, all seemed to point to one thing.

And as if to prove it conclusively, Margery picked up Miss Jane's new lace cap from the floor. It was crumpled and spotted with blood.

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"She's gone! She's been run off with!"

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"She has been killed," Margery said, in a choking voice. "Killed, and she had not an enemy in the world!"

"But where is she?" I asked stupidly.

Margery had more presence of mind than I had; I suppose it is because woman's courage is mental and man's physical, that in times of great strain women always make the better showing. While I was standing in the middle of the room, staring at the confusion around me, Margery was already on her knees, looking under the high, four-post bed. Finding nothing there she went to the closet. It was undisturbed. Pathetic rows of limp black dresses and on the shelves two black crepe bonnets were mute reminders of the little old lady. But there was nothing else in the room.

"Call Robert, the gardener," Margery said quickly, "and have him help you search the grounds and cellars. I will take Bella and go through the house. Above everything, keep it from Aunt Letitia as long as possible."

I locked the door into the disordered room, and with my head whirling, I went to look for Robert.

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It takes a short time to search an acre of lawn and shrubbery. There was no trace of the missing woman anywhere outside the house, and from Bella, as she sat at the foot of the front stairs with her apron over her head, I learned in a monosyllable that nothing had been found in the house. Margery was with Miss Letitia, and from the excited conversation I knew she was telling her—not harrowing details, but that Miss Jane had disappeared during the night.

The old lady was inclined to scoff at first.

"Look in the fruit closet in the store-room," I heard her say. "She's let the spring lock shut on her twice; she was black in the face the last time we found her."

"I did look; she's not there," Margery screamed at her.

"Then she's out looking for stump water to take that wart off her neck. She said yesterday she was going for some."

"But her clothes are all here," Margery persisted. "We think some one must have got in the house."

"If all her clothes are there she's been sleep-

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walking," Miss Letitia said calmly. "We used to have to tie her by a cord around her ankle and fasten it to the bedpost. When she tried to get up the cord would pull and wake her."

I think after a time, however, some of Margery's uneasiness communicated itself to the older woman. She finished dressing, and fumed when we told her we had locked Miss Jane's door and mislaid the key. Finally, Margery got her settled in the back parlor with some peppermints and her knitting; she had a feeling, she said, that Jane had gone after the stump water and lost her way, and I told Margery to keep her in that state of mind as long as she could.

I sent for Hunter that morning and he came at three o'clock. I took him through the back entrance to avoid Miss Letitia. I think he had been skeptical until I threw open the door and showed him the upset chair, the old lady's clothing, and the blood-stained lace cap. His examination was quick and thorough. He took a crumpled sheet of note paper out of the waste-basket and looked at it, then he stuffed it in his pocket. He sniffed the toilet water,

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called Margery and asked her if any clothing was missing, and on receiving a negative answer asked if any shawls or wraps were gone from the halls or other rooms. Margery reported nothing missing.

Before he left the room, Hunter went back and moved the picture which had been disturbed over the mantel. What he saw made him get a chair and, standing on it, take the picture from its nail. Thus exposed, the wall showed an opening about a foot square, and perhaps eighteen inches deep. A metal door, opening in, was unfastened and ajar, and just inside was a copy of a recent sentimental novel and a bottle of some sort of complexion cream. In spite of myself, I smiled; it was so typical of the dear old lady, with the heart of a girl and a skin that was losing its roses. But there was something else in the receptacle, something that made Margery Fleming draw in her breath sharply, and made Hunter raise his eyebrows a little and glance at me. The something was a scrap of unruled white paper, and on it the figures eleven twenty-two!

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CHAPTER VI

A FOUNTAIN PEN

HARRY WARDROP came back from the city at four o'clock, while Hunter was in the midst of his investigation. I met him in the hall and told him what had happened, and with this new apprehension added to the shock of the night before, he looked as though his nerves were ready to snap.

Wardrop was a man of perhaps twenty-seven, as tall as I, although not so heavy, with direct blue eyes and fair hair; altogether a manly and prepossessing sort of fellow. I was not surprised that Margery Fleming had found him attractive—he had the blond hair and off-hand manner that women seem to like. I am dark, myself.

He seemed surprised to find Hunter there, and not particularly pleased, but he followed us to the upper floor and watched silently while Hunter went over the two rooms. Beside the large chest of drawers in the main attic Hunter found perhaps half a dozen

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drops of blood, and on the edge of the open drawer there were traces of more. In the inner room two trunks had been moved out nearly a foot, as he found by the faint dust that had been under them. With the stain on the stair rail, that was all he discovered, and it was little enough. Then he took out his note-book and there among the trunks we had a little seance of our own, in which Hunter asked questions, and whoever could do so answered them.

"Have you a pencil or pen, Mr. Knox?" he asked me, but I had none. Wardrop felt his pockets, with no better success.

"I have lost my fountain pen somewhere around the house to-day," he said irritably. "Here's a pencil—not much of one."

Hunter began his interrogations.

"How old was Miss Maitland—Miss Jane, I mean?"

"Sixty-five," from Margery.

"She had always seemed rational? Not eccentric, or childish?"

"Not at all; the sanest woman I ever knew." This from Wardrop.

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"Has she ever, to your knowledge, received any threatening letters?"

"Never in all her life," from both of them promptly.

"You heard sounds, you say, Miss Fleming. At what time?"

"About half-past one or perhaps a few minutes later. The clock struck two while I was still awake and nervous."

"This person who was walking through the attics here—would you say it was a heavy person? A man, I mean?"

Margery stopped to think.

"Yes," she said finally. "It was very stealthy, but I think it was a man's step."

"You heard no sound of a struggle? No voices? No screams?"

"None at all," she said positively. And I added my quota.

"There could have been no such sounds," I said. "I sat in my room and smoked until a quarter to two. I heard nothing until then, when I heard Mr. Wardrop trying to get into the house. I went down

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to admit him, and—I found the front door open about an inch."

Hunter wheeled on Wardrop.

"A quarter to two?" he asked. "You were coming home from—the city?"

"Yes, from the station."

Hunter watched him closely.

"The last train gets in here at twelve-thirty," he said slowly. "Does it always take you an hour and a quarter to walk the three squares to the house?"

Wardrop flushed uneasily, and I could see Margery's eyes dilate with amazement. As for me, I could only stare.

"I did not come directly home," he said, almost defiantly.

Hunter's voice was as smooth as silk.

"Then—will you be good enough to tell me where you did go?" he asked. "I have reasons for wanting to know."

"Damn your reasons—I beg your pardon, Margery. Look here, Mr. Hunter, do you think I would hurt a hair of that old lady's head? Do you think I came here last night and killed her, or what-

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ever it is that has happened to her? And then went out and tried to get in again through the window?"

"Not necessarily," Hunter said, unruffled. "It merely occurred to me that we have at least an hour of your time last night, while this thing was going on, to account for. However, we can speak of that later. I am practically certain of one thing, Miss Maitland is not dead, or was not dead when she was taken away from this house."

"Taken away!" Margery repeated. "Then you think she was kidnapped?"

"Well, it is possible. It's a puzzling affair all through. You are certain there are no closets or unused rooms where, if there had been a murder, the body could be concealed."

"I never heard of any," Margery said, but I saw Wardrop's face change on the instant. He said nothing, however, but stood frowning at the floor, with his hands deep in his coat pockets.

Margery was beginning to show the effect of the long day's strain; she began to cry a little, and with an air of proprietorship that I resented, somehow, Wardrop went over to her.

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"You are going to lie down, Margery," he said, holding out his hand to help her up. "Mrs. Mellon will come over to Aunt Letitia, and you must get some sleep."

"Sleep!" she said with scorn, as he helped her to her feet. "Sleep, when things like this are occurring! Father first, and now dear old Aunt Jane! Harry, do you know where my father is?"

He faced her, as if he had known the question must come and was prepared for it.

"I know that he is all right, Margery. He has been—out of town. If it had not been for something unforeseen that—happened within the last few hours, he would have been home to-day."

She drew a long breath of relief.

"And Aunt Jane?" she asked Hunter, from the head of the attic stairs, "you do not think she is dead?"

"Not until we have found something more," he answered tactlessly. "It's like where there's smoke there's fire; where there's murder there's a body."

When they had both gone, Hunter sat down on a trunk and drew out a cigar that looked like a bomb.

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"What do you think of it?" I asked, when he showed no disposition to talk.

"I'll be damned if I know," he responded, looking around for some place to expectorate and finding none.

"The window," I suggested, and he went over to it. When he came back he had a rather peculiar expression. He sat down and puffed for a moment.

"In the first place," he began, "we can take it for granted that, unless she was crazy or sleep-walking, she didn't go out in her night-clothes, and there's nothing of hers missing. She wasn't taken in a carriage, providing she was taken at all. There's not a mark of wheels on that drive newer than a week, and besides, you say you heard nothing."

"Nothing," I said positively.

"Then, unless she went away in a balloon, where it wouldn't matter what she had on, she is still around the premises. It depends on how badly she was hurt."

"Are you sure it was she who was hurt?" I asked. "That print of a hand—that is not Miss Jane's."

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In reply Hunter led the way down the stairs to the place where the stain on the stair rail stood out, ugly and distinct. He put his own heavy hand on the rail just below it.

"Suppose," he said, "suppose you grip something very hard, what happens to your hand?"

"It spreads," I acknowledged, seeing what he meant.

"Now, look at that stain. Look at the short fingers—why, it's a child's hand beside mine. The breadth is from pressure. It might be figured out this way. The fingers, you notice, point down the stairs. In some way, let us say, the burglar, for want of a better name, gets into the house. He used a ladder resting against that window by the chest of drawers."

"Ladder!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, there is a pruning ladder there. Now then—he comes down these stairs, and he has a definite object. He knows of something valuable in that cubby hole over the mantel in Miss Jane's room. How does he get in? The door into the upper hall is closed and bolted, but the door into the bath-room is open.

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From there another door leads into the bedroom, and it has no bolt—only a key. That kind of a lock is only a three-minutes delay, or less. Now then, Miss Maitland was a light sleeper. When she wakened she was too alarmed to scream; she tried to get to the door and was intercepted. Finally she got out the way the intruder got in, and ran along the hall. Every door was locked. In a frenzy she ran up the attic stairs and was captured up there. Which bears out Miss Margery's story of the footsteps back and forward."

"Good heavens, what an awful thing!" I gasped. "And I was sitting smoking just across the hall."

"He brings her down the stairs again, probably half dragging her. Once, she catches hold of the stair rail, and holds desperately to it, leaving the stain here."

"But why did he bring her down?" I asked bewildered. "Why wouldn't he take what he was after and get away?"

Hunter smoked and meditated.

"She probably had to get the key of the iron door," he suggested. "It was hidden, and time was

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valuable. If there was a scapegrace member of the family, for instance, who knew where the old lady kept money, and who needed it badly; who knew all about the house, and who—"

"Fleming!" I exclaimed, aghast.

"Or even our young friend, Wardrop," Hunter said quietly. "He has an hour to account for. The trying to get in may have been a blind, and how do you know that what he says was stolen out of his satchel was not what he had just got from the iron box over the mantel in Miss Maitland's room?"

I was dizzy with trying to follow Hunter's facile imagination. The thing we were trying to do was to find the old lady, and, after all, here we brought up against the same *impasse*.

"Then where is she now?" I asked. He meditated. He had sat down on the narrow stairs, and was rubbing his chin with a thoughtful forefinger. "One-thirty, Miss Margery says, when she heard the noise. One-forty-five when you heard Wardrop at the shutters. I tell you, Knox, it is one of two things: either that woman is dead somewhere in this house, or she ran out of the hall door

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just before you went down-stairs, and in that case the Lord only knows where she is. If there is a room anywhere that we have not explored—"

"I am inclined to think there is," I broke in, thinking of Wardrop's face a few minutes before. And just then Wardrop himself joined us. He closed the door at the foot of the boxed-in staircase, and came quietly up.

"You spoke about an unused room or a secret closet, Mr. Hunter," he said, without any resentment in his tone. "We have nothing so sensational as that, but the old house is full of queer nooks and crannies, and perhaps, in one of them, we might find—" he stopped and gulped. Whatever Hunter might think, whatever I might have against Harry Wardrop, I determined then that he had had absolutely nothing to do with little Miss Maitland's strange disappearance.

The first place we explored was a closed and walled-in wine-cellar, long unused, and to which access was gained by a small window in the stone foundation of the house. The cobwebs over the window made it practically an impossible place, but

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we put Robert, the gardener, through it, in spite of his protests.

"There's nothin' there, I tell you," he protested, with one leg over the coping. "God only knows what's down there, after all these years. I've been livin' here with the Miss Maitlands for twenty year, and I ain't never been put to goin' down into cellars on the end of a rope."

He went, because we were three to his one, but he was up again in sixty seconds, with the announcement that the place was as bare as the top of his head.

We moved every trunk in the store-room, although it would have been a moral impossibility for any one to have done it the night before without rousing the entire family, and were thus able to get to and open a large closet, which proved to contain neatly tied and labeled packages of religious weeklies, beginning in the sixties.

The grounds had been gone over inch by inch, without affording any clue, and now the three of us faced one another. The day was almost gone, and we were exactly where we started. Hunter had sent

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men through the town and the adjacent countryside, but no word had come from them. Miss Letitia had at last succumbed to the suspense and had gone to bed, where she lay quietly enough, as is the way with the old, but so mild that she was alarming.

At five o'clock Hawes called me up from the office and almost tearfully implored me to come back and attend to my business. When I said it was impossible, I could hear him groan as he hung up the receiver. Hawes is of the opinion that by keeping fresh magazines in my waiting-room and by persuading me to the extravagance of Turkish rugs, that he has built my practice to its present flourishing state. When I left the telephone, Hunter was preparing to go back to town and Wardrop was walking up and down the hall. Suddenly Wardrop stopped his uneasy promenade and hailed the detective on his way to the door.

"By George," he exclaimed, "I forgot to show you the closet under the attic stairs!"

We hurried up and Wardrop showed us the panel in the hall, which slid to one side when he pushed a bolt under the carpet. The blackness of the closet

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was horrible in its suggestion to me. I stepped back while Hunter struck a match and looked in.

The closet was empty.

"Better not go in," Wardrop said. "It hasn't been used for years and it's black with dust. I found it myself and showed it to Miss Jane. I don't believe Miss Letitia knows it is here."

"It hasn't been used for years!" reflected Hunter, looking around him curiously. "I suppose it has been some time since you were in here, Mr. Wardrop?"

"Several years," Wardrop replied carelessly. "I used to keep contraband here in my college days, cigarettes and that sort of thing. I haven't been in it since then."

Hunter took his foot off a small object that lay on the floor, and picking it up, held it out to Wardrop, with a grim smile.

"Here is the fountain pen you lost this morning, Mr. Wardrop," he said quietly.

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CHAPTER VII

CONCERNING MARGERY

WHEN Hunter had finally gone at six o'clock, summoned to town on urgent business, we were very nearly where we had been before he came. He could only give us theories, and after all, what we wanted was fact—and Miss Jane. Many things, however, that he had unearthed puzzled me.

Why had Wardrop lied about so small a matter as his fountain pen? The closet was empty: what object could he have had in saying he had not been in it for years? I found that my belief in his sincerity of the night before was going. If he had been lying then, I owed him something for a lump on my head that made it difficult for me to wear my hat.

It would have been easy enough for him to rob himself, and, if he had an eye for the theatrical, to work out just some such plot. It was even possible that he had hidden for a few hours in the secret closet the contents of the Russia leather bag. But,

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whatever Wardrop might or might not be, he gave me little chance to find out, for he left the house before Hunter did that afternoon, and it was later, and under strange circumstances, that I met him again.

Hunter had not told me what was on the paper he had picked out of the basket in Miss Jane's room, and I knew he was as much puzzled as I at the scrap in the little cupboard, with eleven twenty-two on it. It occurred to me that it might mean the twenty-second day of the eleventh month, perhaps something that had happened on some momentous, long-buried twenty-second of November. But this was May, and the finding of two slips bearing the same number was too unusual.

After Hunter left I went back to the closet under the upper stairs, and with some difficulty got the panel open again. The space inside, perhaps eight feet high at one end and four at the other, was empty. There was a row of hooks, as if at some time clothing had been hung there, and a flat shelf at one end, gray with dust.

I struck another match and examined the shelf.

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On its surface were numerous scratchings in the dust layer, but at one end, marked out as if drawn on a blackboard, was a rectangular outline, apparently that of a smallish box, and fresh.

My match burned my fingers and I dropped it to the floor, where it expired in a sickly blue flame. At the last, however, it died heroically—like an old man to whom his last hours bring back some of the glory of his prime, burning brightly for a second and then fading into darkness. The last flash showed me, on the floor of the closet and wedged between two boards, a small white globule. It did not need another match to tell me it was a pearl.

I dug it out carefully and took it to my room. In the daylight there I recognized it as an unstrung pearl of fair size and considerable value. There could hardly be a doubt that I had stumbled on one of the stolen gems; but a pearl was only a pearl to me, after all. I didn't feel any of the inspirations which fiction detectives experience when they happen on an important clue.

I lit a cigar and put the pearl on the table in front of me. But no explanation formed itself in the

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tobacco smoke. If Wardrop took the pearls, I kept repeating over and over, if Wardrop took the pearls, who took Miss Jane?

I tried to forget the pearls, and to fathom the connection between Miss Maitland's disappearance and the absence of her brother-in-law. The scrap of paper, eleven twenty-two, must connect them, but how? A family scandal? Dismissed on the instant. There could be nothing that would touch the virginal remoteness of that little old lady. Insanity? Well, Miss Jane might have had a sudden aberration and wandered away, but that would leave Fleming out, and the paper dragged him in. A common enemy?

I smoked and considered for some time over this. An especially malignant foe might rob, or even murder, but it was almost ludicrous to think of his carrying away by force Miss Jane's ninety pounds of austere flesh. The solution, had it not been for the blood-stains, might have been a peaceful one, leaving out the pearls, altogether, but later developments showed that the pearls refused to be omitted. To my mind, however, at that time, the issue seemed

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a double one. I believed that some one, perhaps Harry Wardrop, had stolen the pearls, hidden them in the secret closet, and disposed of them later. I made a note to try to follow up the missing pearls.

Then—I clung to the theory that Miss Maitland had been abducted and was being held for ransom. If I could have found traces of a vehicle of any sort near the house, I would almost have considered my contention proved. That any one could have entered the house, intimidated and even slightly injured the old lady, and taken her quietly out the front door, while I sat smoking in my room with the window open, and Wardrop trying the shutters at the side of the house, seemed impossible. Yet there were the stains, the confusion, the open front door to prove it.

But—and I stuck here—the abductor who would steal an old woman, and take her out into the May night without any covering—not even shoes—clad only in her night-clothes, would run an almost certain risk of losing his prize by pneumonia. For a second search had shown not an article of wearing

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apparel missing from the house. Even the cedar chests were undisturbed; not a blanket was gone.

Just before dinner I made a second round of the grounds, this time looking for traces of wheels. I found none near-by, and it occurred to me that the boldest highwayman would hardly drive up to the door for his booty. When I had extended my search to cover the unpaved lane that separated the back of the Maitland place from its nearest neighbor, I was more fortunate.

The morning delivery wagons had made fresh trails, and at first I despaired. I sauntered up the lane to the right, however, and about a hundred feet beyond the boundary hedge I found circular tracks, broad and deep, where an automobile had backed and turned. The lane was separated by high hedges of osage orange from the properties on either side, and each house in that neighborhood had a drive of its own, which entered from the main street, circled the house and went out as it came.

There was no reason, or, so far as I could see, no legitimate reason, why a car should have stopped there, yet it had stopped and for some time. Deeper

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tracks in the sand at the side of the lane showed that.

I felt that I had made some progress: I had found where the pearls had been hidden after the theft, and this put Bella out of the question. And I had found—or thought I had—the way in which Miss Jane had been taken away from Bellwood.

I came back past the long rear wing of the house which contained, I presumed, the kitchen and the other mysterious regions which only women and architects comprehend. A long porch ran the length of the wing, and as I passed I heard my name called.

"In here in the old laundry," Margery's voice repeated, and I retraced my steps and went up on the porch. At the very end of the wing, dismantled, piled at the sides with firewood and broken furniture, was an old laundry. Its tubs were rusty, its walls mildewed and streaked, and it exhaled the musty odor of empty houses. On the floor in the middle of the room, undeniably dirty and dishevelled, sat Margery Fleming.

"I thought you were never coming," she said petulantly. "I have been here alone for an hour."

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"I'm sure I never guessed it," I apologized. "I should have been only too glad to come and sit with you."

She was fumbling with her hair, which threatened to come down any minute, and which hung, loosely knotted, over one small ear.

"I hate to look ridiculous," she said sharply, "and I detest being laughed at. I've been crying, and I haven't any handkerchief."

I proffered mine gravely, and she took it. She wiped the dusty streaks off her cheeks and pinned her hair in a funny knob on top of her head that would have made any other woman look like a caricature. But still she sat on the floor.

"Now," she said, when she had jabbed the last hair-pin into place and tucked my handkerchief into her belt, "if you have been sufficiently amused, perhaps you will help me out of here."

"Out of where?"

"Do you suppose I'm sitting here because I like it?"

"You have sprained your ankle," I said, with sudden alarm.

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In reply she brushed aside her gown, and for the first time I saw what had occurred. She was sitting half over a trap-door in the floor, which had closed on her skirts and held her fast.

"The wretched thing!" she wailed. "And I have called until I am hoarse. I could shake Heppie! Then I tried to call you mentally. I fixed my mind on you and said over and over, 'Come, please come.' Didn't you feel anything at all?"

"Good old trap-door!" I said. "I know I was thinking about you, but I never suspected the reason. And then to have walked past here twenty minutes ago! Why didn't you call me then?" I was tugging at the door, but it was fast, with the skirts to hold it tight.

"I looked such a fright," she explained. "Can't you pry it up with something?"

I tried several things without success, while Margery explained her plight.

"I was sure Robert had not looked carefully in the old wine cellar," she said, "and then I remembered this trap-door opened into it. It was the only

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place we hadn't explored thoroughly. I put a ladder down and looked around. Ugh!"

"What did you find?" I asked, as my third broomstick lever snapped.

"Nothing—only I know now where Aunt Letitia's Edwin Booth went to. He was a cat," she explained, "and Aunt Letitia made the railroad pay for killing him."

I gave up finally and stood back.

"Couldn't you—er—get out of your garments, and—I could go out and close the door," I suggested delicately. "You see you are sitting on the trap-door, and—"

But Margery scouted the suggestion with the proper scorn, and demanded a pair of scissors. She cut herself loose with vicious snips, while I paraphrased the old nursery rhyme, "She cut her petticoats all around about." Then she gathered up her outraged garments and fled precipitately.

She was unusually dignified at dinner. Neither of us cared to eat, and the empty places—Wardrop's and Miss Letitia's—Miss Jane's had not been set—were like skeletons at the board.

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It was Margery who, after our pretense of a meal, voiced the suspicion I think we both felt.

"It is a strange time for Harry to go away," she said quietly, from the library window.

"He probably has a reason."

"Why don't you say it?" she said suddenly, turning on me. "I know what you think. You believe he only pretended he was robbed!"

"I should be sorry to think anything of the kind," I began. But she did not allow me to finish.

"I saw what you thought," she burst out bitterly. "The detective almost laughed in his face. Oh, you needn't think I don't know: I saw him last night, and the woman too. He brought her right to the gate. You treat me like a child, all of you!"

In sheer amazement I was silent. So a new character had been introduced into the play—a woman, too!

"You were not the only person, Mr. Knox, who could not sleep last night," she went on. "Oh, I know a great many things. I know about the pearls, and what you think about them, and I know more than that, I—"

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She stopped then. She had said more than she intended to, and all at once her bravado left her, and she looked like a frightened child. I went over to her and took one trembling hand.

"I wish you didn't know all those things," I said. "But since you do, won't you let me share the burden? The only reason I am still here is—on your account."

I had a sort of crazy desire to take her in my arms and comfort her, Wardrop or no Wardrop. But at that moment, luckily for me, perhaps, Miss Letitia's shrill old voice came from the stairway.

"Get out of my way, Heppie," she was saying tartly. "I'm not on my death-bed yet, not if I know it. Where's Knox?"

Whereupon I obediently went out and helped Miss Letitia into the room.

"I think I know where Jane is," she said, putting down her cane with a jerk. "I don't know why I didn't think about it before. She's gone to get her new teeth; she's been talkin' of it for a month. Not but what her old teeth would have done well enough."

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"She would hardly go in the middle of the night," I returned. "She was a very timid woman, wasn't she?"

"She wasn't raised right," Miss Letitia said with a shake of her head. "She's the baby, and the youngest's always spoiled."

"Have you thought that this might be more than it appears to be?" I was feeling my way: she was a very old woman. "It—for instance, it might be abduction, kidnapping—for a ransom."

"Ransom!" Miss Letitia snapped. "Mr. Knox, my father made his money by working hard for it: I haven't wasted it—not that I know of. And if Jane Maitland was fool enough to be abducted, she'll stay a while before I pay anything for her. It looks to me as if this detective business was going to be expensive, anyhow."

My excuse for dwelling with such attention to detail on the preliminary story, the disappearance of Miss Jane Maitland and the peculiar circumstances surrounding it, will have to find its justification in the events that followed it. Miss Jane herself, and the solution of that mystery, solved the even

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more tragic one in which we were about to be involved. I say *we*, because it was borne in on me at about that time, that the things that concerned Margery Fleming must concern me henceforth, whether I willed it so or otherwise. For the first time in my life a woman's step on the stair was like no other sound in the world.

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CHAPTER VIII

TOO LATE

AT nine o'clock that night things remained about the same. The man Hunter had sent to investigate the neighborhood and the country just outside of the town, came to the house about eight, and reported "nothing discovered." Miss Letitia went to bed early, and Margery took her up-stairs.

Hunter called me by telephone from town.

"Can you take the nine-thirty up?" he asked. I looked at my watch.

"Yes, I think so. Is there anything new?"

"Not yet; there may be. Take a cab at the station and come to the corner of Mulberry Street and Park Lane. You'd better dismiss your cab there and wait for me."

I sent word up-stairs by Bella, who was sitting in the kitchen, her heavy face sodden with grief, and taking my hat and raincoat—it was raining a light

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spring drizzle—I hurried to the station. In twenty-four minutes I was in the city, and perhaps twelve minutes more saw me at the designated corner, with my cab driving away and the rain dropping off the rim of my hat and splashing on my shoulders.

I found a sort of refuge by standing under the wooden arch of a gate, and it occurred to me that, for all my years in the city, this particular neighborhood was altogether strange to me. Two blocks away, in any direction, I would have been in familiar territory again.

Back of me a warehouse lifted six or seven gloomy stories to the sky. The gate I stood in was evidently the entrance to its yard, and in fact, some uncomfortable movement of mine just then struck the latch, and almost precipitated me backward by its sudden opening. Beyond was a yard full of shadowy wheels and packing cases; the street lights did not penetrate there, and with an uneasy feeling that almost anything, in this none too savory neighborhood, might be waiting there, I struck a match and looked at my watch. It was twenty minutes after ten. Once a man turned the corner and

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came toward me, his head down, his long ulster flapping around his legs. Confident that it was Hunter, I stepped out and touched him on the arm. He wheeled instantly, and in the light which shone on his face, I saw my error.

"Excuse me," I mumbled, "I mistook my man."

He went on again without speaking, only pulling his soft hat down lower over his face. I looked after him until he turned the next corner, and I knew I had not been mistaken; it was Wardrop.

The next minute Hunter appeared, from the same direction, and we walked quickly together. I told him who the man just ahead had been, and he nodded without surprise. But before we turned the next corner he stopped.

"Did you ever hear of the White Cat?" he asked. "Little political club?"

"Never."

"I'm a member of it," he went on rapidly. "It's run by the city ring, or rather it runs itself. Be a good fellow while you're there, and keep your eyes open. It's a queer joint."

The corner we turned found us on a narrow, badly

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paved street. The broken windows of the warehouse still looked down on us, and across the street was an ice factory, with two deserted wagons standing along the curb. As well as I could see for the darkness, a lumber yard stretched beyond the warehouse, its piles of boards giving off in the rain the aromatic odor of fresh pine.

At a gate in the fence beyond the warehouse Hunter stopped. It was an ordinary wooden gate and it opened with a thumb latch. Beyond stretched a long, narrow, brick-paved alleyway, perhaps three feet wide, and lighted by the merest glimmer of a light ahead. Hunter went on regardless of puddles in the brick paving, and I stumbled after him. As we advanced, I could see that the light was a single electric bulb, hung over a second gate. While Hunter fumbled for a key in his pocket, I had time to see that this gate had a Yale lock, was provided, at the side, with an electric bell button, and had a letter slot cut in it.

Hunter opened the gate and preceded me through it. The gate swung to and clicked behind me. After the gloom of the passageway, the small brick-paved

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yard seemed brilliant with lights. Two wires were strung its length, dotted with many electric lamps. In a corner a striped tent stood out in grotesque relief; it seemed to be empty, and the weather was an easy explanation. From the two-story house beyond there came suddenly a burst of piano music and a none too steady masculine voice. Hunter turned to me, with his foot on the wooden steps.

"Above everything else," he warned, "keep your temper. Nobody gives a hang in here whether you're the mayor of the town, the champion pool-player of the first ward, or the roundsman on the beat."

The door at the top of the steps was also Yale-locked. We stepped at once into the kitchen, from which I imagined that the house faced on another street, and that for obvious reasons only its rear entrance was used. The kitchen was bright and clean; it was littered, however, with half-cut loaves of bread, glasses and empty bottles. Over the range a man in his shirt sleeves was giving his whole attention to a slice of ham, sizzling on a skillet, and at a table near-by a young fellow, with his hair cut in a

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barber's oval over the back of his neck, was spreading slices of bread and cheese with mustard.

"How are you, Mr. Mayor?" Hunter said, as he shed his raincoat. "This is Mr. Knox, the man who's engineering the *Star-Eagle* fight."

The man over the range wiped one greasy hand and held it out to me.

"The Cat is purring a welcome," he said, indicating the frying ham. "If my cooking turns out right I'll ask you to have some ham with me. I don't know why in thunder it gets black in the middle and won't cook around the edges."

I recognized the mayor. He was a big fellow, handsome in a heavy way, and "Tommy" to every one who knew him. It seemed I was about to see my city government at play.

Hunter was thoroughly at home. He took my coat and his own and hung them somewhere to dry. Then he went into a sort of pantry opening off the kitchen and came out with four bottles of beer.

"We take care of ourselves here," he explained, as the newly barbered youth washed some glasses. "If you want a sandwich, there is cooked ham in the

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refrigerator and cheese—if our friend at the sink has left any."

The boy looked up from his glasses. "It's rat-trap cheese, that stuff," he growled.

"The other ran out an hour ago and didn't come back," put in the mayor, grinning. "You can kill that with mustard, if it's too lively."

"Get some cigars, will you?" Hunter asked me. "They're on a shelf in the pantry. I have my hands full."

I went for the cigars, remembering to keep my eyes open. The pantry was a small room: it contained an ice-box, stocked with drinkables, ham, eggs and butter. On shelves above were cards, cigars and liquors, and there, too, I saw a box with an indorsement which showed the "honor system" of the Cat Club.

"Sign checks and drop here," it read, and I thought about the old adage of honor among thieves and politicians.

When I came out with the cigars Hunter was standing with a group of new arrivals; they included one of the city physicians, the director of public

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charities and a judge of a local court. The latter, McFeely, a little, thin Irishman, knew me and accosted me at once. The mayor was busy over the range, and was almost purple with heat and unwonted anxiety.

When the three new-comers went up-stairs, instead of going into the grill-room, I looked at Hunter.

"Is this where the political game is played?" I asked.

"Yes, if the political game is poker," he replied, and led the way into the room which adjoined the kitchen.

No one paid any attention to us. Bare tables, a wooden floor, and almost as many cuspidors as chairs, comprised the furniture of the long room. In one corner was a battered upright piano, and there were two fireplaces with old-fashioned mantels. Perhaps a dozen men were sitting around, talking loudly, with much scraping of chairs on the bare floor. At one table they were throwing poker dice, but the rest were drinking beer and talking in a desultory way. At the piano a man with a red

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mustache was mimicking the sextette from *Lucia* and a roar of applause met us as we entered the room. Hunter led the way to a corner and put down his bottles.

"It's fairly quiet to-night," he said. "To-morrow's the big night—Saturday."

"What time do they close up?" I asked. In answer Hunter pointed to a sign over the door. It was a card, neatly printed, and it said, "The White Cat never sleeps."

"There are only two rules here," he explained. "That is one, and the other is, 'If you get too noisy, and the patrol wagon comes, make the driver take you home.'"

The crowd was good-humored; it paid little or no attention to us, and when some one at the piano began to thump a waltz, Hunter, under cover of the noise, leaned over to me.

"We traced Fleming here, through your corner-man and the cabby," he said carefully. "I haven't seen him, but it is a moral certainty he is skulking in one of the up-stairs rooms. His precious private secretary is here, too."

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I glanced around the room, but no one was paying any attention to us.

"I don't know Fleming by sight," the detective went on, "and the pictures we have of him were taken a good while ago, when he wore a mustache. When he was in local politics, before he went to the legislature, he practically owned this place, paying for favors with membership tickets. A man could hide here for a year safely. The police never come here, and a man's business is his own."

"He is up-stairs now?"

"Yes. There are four rooms up there for cards, and a bath-room. It's an old dwelling house. Would Fleming know you?"

"No, but of course Wardrop would."

As if in answer to my objection, Wardrop appeared at that moment. He ran down the painted wooden stairs and hurried through the room without looking to right or left. The piano kept on, and the men at the tables were still engrossed with their glasses and one another. Wardrop was very pale; he bolted into a man at the door, and pushed him aside without ceremony.

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"You might go up now," Hunter said, rising. "I will see where the young gentleman is making for. Just open the door of the different rooms up-stairs, look around for Fleming, and if any one notices you, ask if Al Hunter is there. That will let you out."

He left me then, and after waiting perhaps a minute, I went up-stairs alone. The second floor was the ordinary upper story of a small dwelling house. The doors were closed, but loud talking, smoke, and the rattle of chips floated out through open transoms. From below the noise of the piano came up the staircase, unmelodious but rhythmical, and from the street on which the house faced an automobile was starting its engine, with a series of shot-like explosions.

The noise was confusing, disconcerting. I opened two doors, to find only the usual poker table, with the winners sitting quietly, their cards bunched in the palms of their hands, and the losers, growing more voluble as the night went on, buying chips recklessly, drinking more than they should. The atmosphere was reeking with smoke.

The third door I opened was that of a dingy bath-

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room, with a zinc tub and a slovenly wash-stand. The next, however, was different. The light streamed out through the transom as in the other rooms, but there was no noise from within. With my hand on the door, I hesitated—then, with Hunter's injunction ringing in my ears, I opened it and looked in.

A breath of cool night air from an open window met me. There was no noise, no smoke, no sour odor of stale beer. A table had been drawn to the center of the small room, and was littered with papers, pen and ink. At one corner was a tray, containing the remnants of a meal; a pillow and a pair of blankets on a couch at one side showed the room had been serving as a bedchamber.

But none of these things caught my eye at first. At the table, leaning forward, his head on his arms, was a man. I coughed, and receiving no answer, stepped into the room.

"I beg your pardon," I said, "but I am looking for—"

Then the truth burst on me, overwhelmed me. A thin stream was spreading over the papers on the

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table, moving slowly, sluggishly, as is the way with blood when the heart pump is stopped. I hurried over and raised the heavy, wobbling, gray head. It was Allan Fleming and he had been shot through the forehead.

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CHAPTER IX

ONLY ONE EYE CLOSED

MY FIRST impulse was to rouse the house; my second, to wait for Hunter. To turn loose that mob of half-drunken men in such a place seemed profanation. There was nothing of the majesty or panoply of death here, but the very sordidness of the surroundings made me resolve to guard the new dignity of that figure. I was shocked, of course; it would be absurd to say that I was emotionally unstrung. On the contrary, I was conscious of a distinct feeling of disappointment. Fleming had been our key to the Bellwood affair, and he had put himself beyond helping to solve any mystery. I locked the door and stood wondering what to do next. I should have called a doctor, no doubt, but I had seen enough of death to know that the man was beyond aid of any kind.

It was not until I had bolted the door that I discovered the absence of any weapon. Everything

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that had gone before had pointed to a position so untenable that suicide seemed its natural and inevitable result. With the discovery that there was no revolver on the table or floor, the thing was more ominous. I decided at once to call the young city physician in the room across the hall, and with something approximating panic, I threw open the door—to face Harry Wardrop, and behind him, Hunter.

I do not remember that any one spoke. Hunter jumped past me into the room and took in in a single glance what I had labored to acquire in three minutes. As Wardrop came in, Hunter locked the door behind him, and we three stood staring at the prostrate figure over the table.

I watched Wardrop: I have never seen so suddenly abject a picture. He dropped into a chair, and feeling for his handkerchief, wiped his shaking lips; every particle of color left his face, and he was limp, unnerved.

"Did you hear the shot?" Hunter asked me. "It has been a matter of minutes since it happened."

"I don't know," I said, bewildered. "I heard a

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lot of explosions, but I thought it was an automobile, out in the street."

Hunter was listening while he examined the room, peering under the table, lifting the blankets that had trailed off the couch on to the floor. Some one outside tried the door-knob, and finding the door locked, shook it slightly.

"Fleming!" he called under his breath. "Fleming!"

We were silent, in response to a signal from Hunter, and the steps retreated heavily down the hall. The detective spread the blankets decently over the couch, and the three of us moved the body there. Wardrop was almost collapsing.

"Now," Hunter said quietly, "before I call in Doctor Gray from the room across, what do you know about this thing, Mr. Wardrop?"

Wardrop looked dazed.

"He was in a bad way when I left this morning," he said huskily. "There isn't much use now trying to hide anything; God knows I've done all I could. But he has been using cocaine for years, and to-day he ran out of the stuff. When I got here, about half

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an hour ago, he was on the verge of killing himself. I got the revolver from him—he was like a crazy man, and as soon as I dared to leave him, I went out to try and find a doctor—"

"To get some cocaine?"

"Yes."

"Not—because he was already wounded, and you were afraid it was fatal?"

Wardrop shuddered; then he pulled himself together, and his tone was more natural.

"What's the use of lying about it?" he said wearily. "You won't believe me if I tell the truth, either, but—he was dead when I got here. I heard something like the bang of a door as I went up-stairs, but the noise was terrific down below, and I couldn't tell. When I went in, he was just dropping forward, and—" he hesitated.

"The revolver?" Hunter queried, lynx-eyed.

"Was in his hand. He was dead then."

"Where is the revolver?"

"I will turn it over to the coroner."

"You will give it to me," Hunter replied sharply.

And after a little fumbling, Wardrop produced it

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from his hip pocket. It was an ordinary thirty-eight. The detective opened it and glanced at it. Two chambers were empty.

"And you waited—say ten minutes, before you called for help, and even then you went outside hunting a doctor! What were you doing in those ten minutes?"

Wardrop shut his lips and refused to reply.

"If Mr. Fleming shot himself," the detective pursued relentlessly, "there would be powder marks around the wound. Then, too, he was in the act of writing a letter. It was a strange impulse, this—you see, he had only written a dozen words."

I glanced at the paper on the table. The letter had no superscription; it began abruptly:

"I shall have to leave here. The numbers have followed me. To-night—"

That was all.

"This is not suicide," Hunter said gravely. "It is murder, and I warn you, Mr. Wardrop, to be careful what you say. Will you ask Doctor Gray to come in, Mr. Knox?"

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I went across the hall to the room where the noise was loudest. Fortunately, Doctor Gray was out of the game. He was opening a can of caviare at a table in the corner and came out in response to a gesture. He did not ask any questions, and I let him go into the death chamber unprepared. The presence of death apparently had no effect on him, but the identity of the dead man almost stupefied him.

"Fleming!" he said, awed, as he looked down at the body. "Fleming, by all that's sacred! And a suicide!"

Hunter watched him grimly.

"How long has he been dead?" he asked.

The doctor glanced at the bullet wound in the forehead, and from there significantly to the group around the couch.

"Not an hour—probably less than half," he said. "It's strange we heard nothing, across the hall there."

Hunter took a clean folded handkerchief from his pocket and opening it laid it gently over the dead face. I think it was a relief to all of us. The doctor

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got up from his kneeling posture beside the couch, and looked at Hunter inquiringly.

"What about getting him away from here?" he said. "There is sure to be a lot of noise about it, and—you remember what happened when Butler killed himself here."

"He was reported as being found dead in the lumber yard," Hunter said dryly. "Well, Doctor, this body stays where it is, and I don't give a whoop if the whole city government wants it moved. It won't be. This is murder, not suicide."

The doctor's expression was curious.

"Murder!" he repeated. "Why—who—"

But Hunter had many things to attend to; he broke in ruthlessly on the doctor's amazement.

"See if you can get the house empty, Doctor; just tell them he is dead—the story will get out soon enough."

As the doctor left the room Hunter went to the open window, through which a fresh burst of rain was coming, and closed it. The window gave me an idea, and I went over and tried to see through the streaming pane. There was no shed or low building

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outside, but not five yards away the warehouse showed its ugly walls and broken windows.

"Look here, Hunter," I said, "why could he not have been shot from the warehouse?"

"He could have been—but he wasn't," Hunter affirmed, glancing at Wardrop's drooping figure. "Mr. Wardrop, I am going to send for the coroner, and then I shall ask you to go with me to the office and tell the chief what you know about this. Knox, will you telephone to the coroner?"

In an incredibly short time the club-house was emptied, and before midnight the coroner himself arrived and went up to the room. As for me, I had breakfasted, lunched and dined on horrors, and I sat in the deserted room down-stairs and tried to think how I was to take the news to Margery.

At twelve-thirty Wardrop, Hunter and the coroner came down-stairs, leaving a detective in charge of the body until morning, when it could be taken home. The coroner had a cab waiting, and he took us at once to Hunter's chief. He had not gone to bed, and we filed into his library sepulchrally.

Wardrop told his story, but it was hardly con-

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