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Books by

ISABEL OSTRANDER

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ASHES TO ASHES

HOW MANY CARDS?

THE ISLAND OF INTRIGUE

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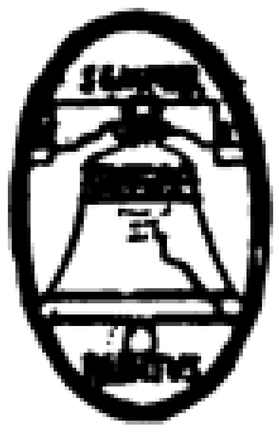
THE CRIMSON BLOTTER

BY

ISABEL OSTRANDER



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1921

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	The Warning	9
II	Peter Steals a Base	22
III	Among Whispering Trees	34
IV	The Bronze Sword	47
V	The Letter	60
VI	The Sisters	77
VII	Montie Sends a Wire	92
VIII	The Lady in Black	104
IX	Flora	116
X	The Alibi	131
XI	One Million in Cash	144
XII	The Red Dog	156
XIII	"For Himself Alone"	167
XIV	The Pride of Miss Jaffray	180
XV	The Car Without a Number	193
XVI	The Gifts of the Greeks	207
XVII	The Fifty-Fifty Chance	216
XVIII	"Scattered to the Four Winds"	229
XIX	The Shrine	244
XX	"He Who Came First"	257
XXI	Montie Russell, Matador	265
XXII	Surprises	276
XXIII	The Legacy	286
XXIV	Without Clew	295

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CHAPTER I

THE WARNING

"I TELL you, Jim, everything's been too quiet in this town! The whole summer has gone by without a single crime being pulled off that was worth two sticks on the front page; not a murder that would raise the hair of my maiden aunt, not a case of robbery or kidnaping or even arson, nothing but a few insignificant killings in what is known in polite circles as the underworld, and the usual suicides. Something is bound to break soon and break big." Peter Sayre, star criminal reporter on the city's most sensational of newspapers, threw down his serviette in disgust and gazed across the table challengingly at his companion. "You know yourself that Headquarters has been like a morgue for weeks!"

Sergeant James McNulty of the homicide bureau placidly finished his melon and reached for the coffee pot.

"Things have been pretty quiet," he admitted. "That's no reason, though, why any particularly heinous crime should be committed just to furnish grist for your print mill, Pete. I'm satisfied to let all bets lie."

"You're not, you fraud! I saw the cards spread out

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on the table last night when I came in and you never play Canfield except when you're trying to work out a problem or impatient for something to start. This man's town has come to a pretty pass for two crime hounds like you and me, when your chief has to put you on a wop knifing just to keep your hand in and my old man gives me an assignment to that two-for-five Hoboken cigar-bomb case!" Peter pushed back his chair and lighted a cigarette. "Besides, I feel it in my bones that something is liable to drop any minute and you know my hunches——"

"That's not a hunch, it's the change in the weather!" the other laughed. "There must have been a touch of frost last night for I noticed from my window that the trees were commencing to turn in the Square. You are going across the river, then? I'll look in at Headquarters to see if anything has turned up during the night and meet you for lunch at Joe's, if you say so."

Pete nodded, and, picking up his hat, he strolled out, while McNulty, familiarly and affectionately known as "Nutty" to the Department, because of his original and sometimes eccentric methods of conducting a case, finished his breakfast, welcomed the arrival of the scrubwoman, who came each day to put their modest apartment in order, and started southeast across the Square toward Center Street.

He was tall and thin and ungainly, with straw-colored hair, mild blue eyes and the lugubrious, lantern-jawed face of a professional comedian. Peter Sayre, on the contrary, was below the average height and inclined to

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a rotundity which he worked with frantic loathing to keep down. He was the son of a country editor and a graduate of a freshwater college, while most of Jim McNulty's earlier education had been picked up in the streets of the lower East Side. Their friendship, begun five years before, when, each in his separate capacity, they had met on a certain notorious murder case, was one of those mutual and instantaneous attractions which, inexplicable to outsiders, had been built upon the firmest of foundations.

No professional limitations bounded the confidence between them, for by an unspoken code Peter never used the data which his friend brought from headquarters until the latter gave the word; in consequence they frequently worked out cases together in a harmonious partnership.

Sergeant McNulty smiled now at the thought of the other's "hunch" as he boarded a surface car. There was an autumnal tang in the air that set his blood racing, but the sun was shining as brightly as in midsummer, and an atmosphere of peace and well-being seemed to brood over the city. It was true that there had been an unprecedented dearth of crimes important enough to warrant the attention of the higher authorities and he had found himself growing restive in enforced idleness, but no premonition assailed him such as Pete had voiced.

Arriving at headquarters, he made his way to the homicide bureau at the end of the long corridor and opened the door to find the huge room empty except for the presence of two men who sat at a desk with their heads

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close together: Inspector Corbin and the Chief himself.

They glanced up at the sound of the opening door and the Chief emitted a grunt of satisfaction.

"Just the man!—Come over here, Nutty, and take a squint at this! If it isn't the work of a crank or a practical joker it ought to be right in your line. I've seen a lot of queer things happen in my time, but to be obligingly warned in advance when a murder is going to be pulled off is a new one on me!"

Jim dropped his hat on his own desk as he passed it, and, crossing to his superior's side, he took the sheet of paper held out to him. The message it bore, scrawled in rough, printed characters such as a child might have penciled, was unaddressed, but the few lines were terse and to the point.

"Seward Keene Moberley is in danger of his life. You cannot stay the hand, but act and you may seize it when its work is done."

"Humph!" Jim commented. "Not very complimentary to the Department, is it, Chief? How and when did you receive this?"

"Through the early mail this morning. Here's the envelope." As he spoke the captain of the homicide bureau, affectionately called "Chief" by his subordinates, handed it over. "What do you think of it? Is it a hoax?"

Jim pursed up his lips reflectively as he examined the postmark.

"We-ell, the phrasing is as vague as that of the ordinary crank, but although the letters are printed no at-

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tempt has been made to purposely misspell any of the words, as the crank usually does. This was mailed at City Hall at seven o'clock last evening, the paper used is of the cheapest quality without watermark and the pencil a number two lead; all of which gives us just exactly nothing, not a single clew." He paused and then added: "If any other man in the city as prominent as Seward Moberley had been mentioned as the prospective victim I should be inclined to look into this, I think; it will be as well to do so, anyway, and to warn him personally, but it seems absurd on the face of it, even in these times of social upheaval, that any one would want to take *his* life."

The Chief nodded slowly and Inspector Corbin stirred in his chair. Seward Moberley was a power in Wall Street with a fortune running into many millions, yet he was at the same time the most practical of philanthropists, whose far-reaching charities had brought creature comforts to thousands upon thousands of starved bodies, rather than intellectual opportunities to minds too stultified by generations of physical hardship to grasp them.

"Feed the people first! Clothe them! Give them a chance to work and a fair deal when they do, and offer them your book learning afterwards!"

This had been his cry and his precept for forty of his sixty years and his name was a beloved household word in every slum in the city, where his presence was as frequently known. Even the most muck-raking of newspapers mentioned him only with a respect bordering on

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reverence, and the almost Spartan simplicity of his solitary everyday existence had been cited as in marked contrast to the orgy of extravagance in which his contemporaries had indulged during the first years of peace. It seemed inconceivable, as Jim McNulty had said, that any brain, no matter how diseased, could consider him a menace to society whose removal would benefit any living being.

Equally inconceivable was it that he could have any enemies in his private life, and yet the Chief voiced just the possibility of this in a vague generalization.

"No one is perfect and our experience down here has shown us time and again that an established reputation for a life like an open book often conceals a few dark pages. I'm talking like a book now myself, but you know it is true, both of you. Then, too, it is easy enough to incur a personal grudge, over, perhaps, a fancied grievance, without being even conscious of it, which, magnified by a brooding mind, might become a very real menace. Yes, Nutty, I think Mr. Moberley must be interviewed and warned, and with or without his consent, I'll put a guard about his property from now on. You're the man to talk to him; go to it and then come back here and report."

"But—but I'm attached to your bureau, Chief!" Jim protested. "No crime has been committed yet!"

"You mean that the matter of this letter does not properly belong in the hands of the homicide bureau? You are right, but the Commissioner himself put it in my charge." Chief Hardy refolded the sheet of paper

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and, returning it to its envelope, held it once more toward the sergeant. "Show this to Moberley if you like. You won't have any difficulty in seeing him at his office; he has the reputation of never turning any one down who seeks a personal interview. Find out if he knows of any active enemies and we'll trail them for the next few days, or weeks if necessary. I don't care if they are the biggest men on the Street! We can't afford to take a chance on Seward Moberley's life!"

A quarter of an hour later, Jim was seated in the outer office of Seward K. Moberley & Company, at the end of a long row of chairs which contained as heterogeneous a collection of people as he had ever seen gathered together. Prosperous looking brokers in immaculate garb rubbed elbows not only with the shabbily clad but respectable poor, both men and women, but also with one or two forlorn wrecks of society who had evidently ventured there in desperation as to a last resort before self-sought oblivion.

The detective sergeant had at first anticipated a long wait, but he marveled at the quickness and despatch with which, one after another, the ill-assorted company disappeared behind a plain mahogany door at the farther end of the big room, at the summons of a cheerful-faced secretary, whose manner was courteously deferential to each and all of them. None reappeared again, and the detective inferred that they must have been dismissed through some other door which opened directly upon the main corridor.

When his turn came, another queue had formed behind

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him very like the first, and he entered a sunny office furnished more like a gentleman's library than a business sanctum in the heart of the financial district. Behind a long writing-table in the center of the room sat a slender but virile looking man with gray hair worn slightly longer than the prevailing fashion and a smooth-shaven, sensitive face that belied the sixty years with which the Blue Book credited him.

There was nothing mechanical in the smile of welcome that curved his mobile lips and lighted his fine eyes, but a little puzzled look crept into the latter as he obviously tried to place the type of his visitor.

"Sit down, Mr. McNulty." A slim, long-fingered hand waved the younger man to a chair. "Tell me what I can do for you."

"I am not 'Mr.' McNulty, although that is the way I described myself when I desired an interview with you, sir, but Detective-Sergeant McNulty of the homicide bureau at headquarters," Jim responded gravely as he took the proffered seat. "I have been sent by the commissioner himself to see you on a confidential and very serious matter."

A look of genuine concern and distress passed over the expressive features.

"I sincerely hope, Sergeant, that you have not come to tell me that one of my friends is in trouble, especially one of those in the more humble walks of life, but I stand ready to coöperate with your commissioner and do anything I can."

Jim McNulty shook his head.

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"It's nothing like that, sir; at least not yet. Your reputation of a lifetime spent in benefiting others is as well known to the Department as it is to the world at large, but I am here to ask you a very personal question and upon your candid reply may rest your safety from harm, even your life itself." He bent forward earnestly. "Mr. Moberley, have you to your knowledge an enemy in this world?"

Seward Moberley sat back in his chair and regarded his visitor with a steady, frank gaze. Then he smiled as he shook his head.

"No, Sergeant McNulty. I don't know of any one who could have any harmful intentions against me. If it has been put within my power to benefit others, as you say, I have been in turn benefited a thousand-fold by that which they have given me in return—friendship. It is the only thing that I value, the only thing that I can carry down to the grave with me, and those who have little else to give have granted it to me in overflowing measure. I fear no enemies."

"You will forgive me for my seeming insistence, but I was speaking not only of those to whom you have rendered material aid." McNulty clung doggedly to the point. "Your financial competitors or those who are nearest to you in your social or even family life; these must all be considered as well in the light of the information which has come to us."

He drew the letter of warning from his pocket and laid it upon the desk before the other man.

The latter read it and for some minutes thereafter sat

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regarding it thoughtfully, but with neither resentment nor alarm visible upon his calm countenance. Then with a sigh he shook his silvery head once more.

"Poor misguided fellow!" he exclaimed. "This is either the work of a distraught mind or some one is trying to play a so-called practical joke on your commissioner, and in either case it is simply to be disregarded. I appreciate the solicitude of your department but it will be unnecessary to take any steps in the affair. I have financial colleagues but no competitors, my servants have all been with me for more than a generation and they are to be trusted implicitly. I reside alone and have no living relatives except a nephew, a splendid young fellow whom I love like a son. Please extend my thanks to the commissioner and tell him that there are no grounds for apprehension."

"You do not, then, desire that we give you police protection for a time at least about the grounds of your residence at night?" McNulty asked as he accepted the letter extended to him in polite dismissal and rose. "I do not mind telling you, sir, that in spite of your confidence we would all rest easier in our minds if we felt that you were securely guarded."

"My friend," Seward Moberley rose also and laid a fatherly hand upon the young detective's shoulder, "if such a step were taken, if the possible need of it were even seriously entertained, I should feel that my long life had been a complete failure. When I need protection against my fellow men I will have merited destruction at their hands. Looking back, I can see many mistakes,

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but I have never to my knowledge injured any one and I must positively forbid that any such step as you propose be taken on my behalf."

McNulty shrugged slightly.

"It may be a hoax, as you say, sir, and a crank would scarcely announce his intention beforehand if he meant to attempt your assassination, but suppose some member of a gang had decided to snitch and had written in this anonymous, guarded fashion to warn us without revealing his own identity, perhaps in personal fear. If you will not authorize us to protect you, will you not at least go to some hotel or even leave the city for a time until we can locate the sender of this letter?"

Moberley drew himself up almost angrily, but when he spoke, although it was with an air of finality, his tone was still gentle.

"I have never run away, Sergeant, and I shall not do so now. If the writer of this letter, or some other person to whom he may allude, call upon me at any time he will find me here or in my home as usual, unarmed, and with no bodyguard about. I should be unworthy of my lifelong principles, if I feared harm from any one."

This time the dismissal in his tone was unmistakable and as a young stenographer appeared in the second doorway to usher him out the detective took leave of the philanthropist. As he departed he heard a sudden exclamation of delighted surprise from Seward Moberley and turned to see him rise from his chair and greet with extended hands a young woman whom the secretary was just ushering in. She appeared to be in her late twenties,

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with hair as black and glossy as a bird's wing and skin like delicate, blue-veined white marble. McNulty caught this impression before the door closed behind him, and he returned to Headquarters with a maze of complicating thoughts crowding his brain.

"One thing is certain, Chief!" he remarked to Captain Hardy and Inspector Corliss. "The old boy may be cracked on the subject of the natural born goodness of sinful humanity but he's sincere about it. Nothing doing with his permission on the question of giving him protection. He simply won't believe that any one in the world would harm a hair of his head."

"And if by any chance he *should* be bumped off, in spite of his ideals, the press would let out a roar that would lift us all out of our jobs here and maybe the commissioner as well!" the Chief retorted grimly. "That settles it: we're running no such risk, hoax or no hoax. You know that wonderful old place of his that has been in his family for generations, away up above Riverside Drive proper? The grounds are thickly wooded and extend for a whole city block or more on the side toward the river. I'll have a squad of men up there as soon as it's dusk and not another living soul will enter or leave the property without giving an account of themselves for the next few days. Did you learn anything more about him than we already know, Nutty?"

"One or two facts," Jim replied. "He's got a nephew he seems crazy about, but the young man doesn't live with him although he is his only living relative."

The Chief nodded impatiently.

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"Charles Moberley, Harnell graduate, lives in Bracefield Bachelor Apartments, reading law with old, established firm." He supplied the information tersely. "I've been having his record looked up while you were interviewing the old man and it is as clean as a whip. I think I'll assign you to have a look-see with the boys tonight when they surround his place. In the meantime you might cut along up there before he gets home from the office and kind of figure out what servants he keeps and how the land lays generally."

"I'm on, Chief." Jim caught up his hat once more, then paused. "There's no way of tracing that letter first, I suppose?"

"Not with the whole postal department to back us up!" growled Captain Hardy. "You said yourself it didn't give us a sign of a clew. However, if you run into that pal of yours, Pete Sayre of the *Despatch*, you might tip him off about it but not for publication yet. He may be able to find out the identity of the writer of that letter."

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CHAPTER II

PETER STEALS A BASE

BEFORE he started for "Joe's," the little Italian restaurant near Park Row where a select coterie of newspaper men repaired at noon, Sergeant McNulty spent a long hour in that grim photographic hall known as the rogues' gallery. It was one of his idiosyncrasies not to mention to his superiors in the homicide bureau any fact upon which he had not absolutely decided in his own mind, unless he felt that it was of immediate importance, and the vague idea which had come to him as the result of two fleeting glances in the offices of Seward Moberley must be substantiated to his own satisfaction or finally rejected.

When he at length started for the restaurant, however, his brow was still knotted in a puzzled frown which remained as he seated himself at their accustomed table and waited for Pete to put in an appearance. His search among the portraits of evildoers who had fallen foul of the law had been narrowed to two types: a tall, alert-appearing young man and a demure girl, several years his

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junior, with a delicate, aquiline nose and the merest shade of a cast in her left eye.

The young man he had in mind had been dark and the girl fair, but Jim McNulty paid no heed to this as he scanned the rows of faces, for he well knew the miracles of make-up and practical disguise at the disposal of the experienced criminal. Had he found what he sought he would have communicated once more without delay with his chief, but his efforts had failed to satisfy him and he sat reflectively staring at the none too clean table-cloth until a hearty clap on the shoulder roused him and Pete Sayre dropped into the vacant chair opposite.

"How goes it? Anything doing at the shop?" the latter demanded cheerily, adding, before the other could speak: "I drew a blank in Hoboken, of course; desperate bomb-maker turns out to be poor but honest inventor trying to perfect harmlessly exploding cigar-shaped fire crackers for the next Fourth of July market. But you look rather as though you had swallowed one of them, Jim. Was that feeling in my bones prophetic this morning?"

"A little premature but possibly it was correct." Jim McNulty smiled, gave his order to the waiter and then turned again to his friend. "Pete, if you were going to croak one of the biggest men in town would you announce your intention to the police or put it in the power of any one else to do so?"

"I would not!" replied the reporter with decision. "Not if it meant the whole front page with leaders a foot high for a week, and a city editorship besides, when

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my handpicked jury acquitted me!—But who is the obliging gentleman who tipped you off about his program, and what big gun is he going to put the skids under?"

McNulty recounted the affair to the other and produced the letter, carefully concealed behind a newspaper, for his edification.

"Rummest thing I ever heard of," commented Pete, when he had finished. "I suppose your chief hasn't taken the lid off yet as far as I am concerned, has he? At that, I think I'll give myself a half holiday and run up and give the old Moberley place a look over with you this afternoon."

"Look here, Pete." Jim laid down his knife and fork, and leaning forward spoke in a still more confidential tone. "You're as much of a human directory on city crooks of recent years, even the petty ones, as the chief himself. Do you happen to know whether or not Seward Moberley ever interested himself in prison reform or the welfare of ex-convicts?"

"Not that I ever heard of, although he has given large sums to associations that do that sort of work among other things." Pete stared. "Have you any particular crook in mind?"

Jim laughed.

"I don't know. Do you recall any little blonde in her early twenties with a high nose that's going to hook over when she is old and a slight cast in one of her eyes which are of a peculiar, streaked blue? Her manner is quite too unsophisticated for the most carefully brought-up of girls who go out into the business world to earn their

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livelihood, and she favored me with an odd, furtive glance which belied it."

Pete reflected and then shook his head.

"Can't place her," he said. "If it weren't for the Roman nose effect and the cast she might be 'Rubber-joint' Rose Paley, that freak kid who victimized all the accident insurance people. You remember about her, don't you? She was a born contortionist and could throw her limbs out of joint by a mere twist; it all came out at her trial and the doctors wrote her up at great length under the influence of the baby stare that was her chief asset with adjusters formerly, but she went to a reformatory for all that. It seems that her family knew from her childhood of this strange ability of hers—it is not a condition unknown to the medical fraternity, although rare—and they used to take out accident policies for her. Then, after a discreet interval, she would be found some fine evening lying along the street car tracks or in the gutter on roads frequented by motorists, with a dislocated arm or thigh. She grew too confident, worked the trick once too often, and a new company had her trailed and watched the stunt."

"I do recall something about it, but I was working night and day myself on the Randolph murder then; three years ago, wasn't it?" Jim asked.

"Yes." Pete nodded. "It is not as impossible a stunt as you might imagine. Out in the country where I come from there was a man with no surgical knowledge who could set dislocated legs and arms by a simple jerk better than any graduate physician I ever saw; a natural bone-

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setter, the people called him. Of course nobody could repeatedly stand such an ordeal as the Paley girl put herself through and I fancy she must be pretty well crippled by now if she is out."

Jim made no immediate reply, but all his detective instincts awakened. Noses could be changed in contour by the injection of paraffin, he knew, and a cast made in an eye by the simple cutting of a muscular cord. Moreover, the demure young stenographer who had ushered him out of Seward Moberley's private office had limped slightly and held her arms with noticeable stiffness. He forced his thoughts temporarily from her to the cheerfully courteous secretary in the outer office of the magnate, whose face had also seemed vaguely familiar and described him as well as he was able to Pete, but the mental picture he drew was so lacking in individual points as to have fitted the majority of the youthful male populace, and the reporter was unable to help him.

"When it comes to a good sensational murder," that young man observed with gruesome relish as they left the restaurant, "give me the corpse and the weapon and plenty of clews scattered about. I don't care how baffling they are, it's enough to keep the old *Despatch* from dying of this innocuous desuetude thing for a few weeks anyway. But when you have no stiff, no weapon, no clews but a crazy letter that isn't a clew at all, only a hint that something is going to happen, Hardy can be as mysterious about it as he pleases for all I care! I'm going to hang around Seward Moberley for the next few days and if there's a scoop in it your Uncle Peter gets it.

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That's fair enough for your chief not to kick, isn't it?"

Jim agreed, somewhat reluctantly.

"How are you going to do it?" he demanded.

"Easy enough, if you haven't given my old brown suit to the janitor," replied Pete. "The subway en route to Van Cortlandt runs within a few blocks of the Moberley estate. If you are going up there to reconnoiter, I should advise your using it. I'll run into you somewhere about the neighborhood later."

"But I thought you were going with me!" Jim objected.

"Not I! You're holding out on me about the little blonde and the young man whose description you couldn't give me beyond what might have applied to almost any one." Pete laughed good-naturedly. "That's your pigeon, of course, and there may be nothing in that letter but an attempt at silly notoriety, but supposing—just supposing, mind, old man,—that it really means business, the old *Despatch*, thanks to us both, may take on a new lease of life."

"And if we fail to succeed in acting upon the warning, providing it proves to be a real one, I can see where I go back to pounding my beat in the tall grass!" retorted Jim, adding: "Is Bradley still in charge of the morgue in the *Despatch* offices?"

"Sure. Go up and he'll give you what dope you want on Seward Moberley." Pete waved his hand in farewell and then called back over his shoulder: "See you before dark."

The "morgue" at the newspaper office was the depart-

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ment where the life history and deeds of people prominent in all phases of the city's existence were kept tabulated and strictly up to date in readiness for their demise and promptly subsequent obituaries, and there Sergeant McNulty spent another fruitless hour; fruitless because it taught him little that he did not already know about Seward Keene Moberley, and nothing that could point to a potential enemy.

A large part of Moberley's fortune had been inherited from his mother's people, who had amassed it slowly and honestly, generation by generation, from the soil of the fertile Middle West when that region was new. No taint of injustice or rapacity had marred its acquisition and when it passed from the last of the Keenes to the present hands, Moberley had used it to his everlasting honor as the world could testify.

Leaving the *Despatch* office, McNulty returned to the rooms which he and Pete shared together to find no signs either of that enterprising young journalist or of the latter's disreputable old brown suit which he still donned occasionally when out for information from the rougher element of society and in which he took unfeigned comfort and satisfaction.

The sergeant wondered how, in the possible locality in which that suit would pass muster, Pete hoped to learn anything, but he had no time for idle speculation. Himself changing into old but neat and serviceably warm clothing, for the coming evening promised to be sharp with the aftermath of the touch of frost, and pocketing his revolver and electric torch, McNulty journeyed in the

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subway to a station within half a mile of the Moberley estate. Thence he strolled over to the winding driveway which skirted the river along the ridge of a steep declivity and turned north.

On his left was nothing but the wooded descent, guarded only by a low concrete wall with gaps here and there which showed that it was still in process of construction; on his right the ground rose sharply, topped with squatters' shacks, behind which occasional towering apartments could be seen. A motor car or two, bound northward with its burden of pleasure seekers, overtook and passed him on his walk, but for the most part nothing disturbed the almost bucolic serenity of the autumnal afternoon.

At length McNulty reached a rise in the road, where the broken concrete wall gave place to a higher one of plain but solid granite. Winding paths and driveways spread with crushed bluestone disappeared between the well-kept trees and clumps of shrubbery, and among them in the distance, on the highest point above the river, rose the square, shining, white outlines of a great Colonial house. A lodge in the same style of architecture stood at the right of the main gates, but the detective gave it a wide berth and made for the stables and garage with their clustering out-buildings at the northern end of the estate.

A man in shirtsleeves was exercising a blooded trotter on the main road, and another was harnessing a team of thoroughbreds to an old-fashioned victoria before the open carriage house door just within the grounds. Save

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that the latter was hatless, he wore the almost obsolete garb of a coachman, and it was to him that McNulty addressed himself, as he paused deferentially at the stable gate.

"Excuse me, but this is Mr. Seward Moberley's place, isn't it?"

The coachman glanced up, displaying a broad, friendly countenance with a pair of twinkling blue eyes.

"It is," he replied briefly and turned his attention again to his task.

"You don't need an extra hand, do you?" McNulty threw just the right note of wistfulness into his voice. "I'm used to horses; brought up with them all my life, as you might say, but what with the automobiles crowding them out it's hard for a decent stableman to earn a living wage in the city now. I don't drink even when it's to be had, nor smoke anywhere near the barns and I'm steady, if I do say it."

The coachman looked up again and saw only a respectably if shabbily clad individual with mild blue eyes and the awkward, ungainly bearing of one lately come from the country.

"We do need a stableman," he remarked more cordially. "Did Mr. Moberley send you up here?"

McNulty shook his head.

"I never saw him but I've heard of him; how good he is to folks. I thought maybe he'd give me a job if he could use me, for I'm almost at the end of my rope."

As he spoke the doors of the garage on the opposite side of the driveway opened and a smart town car with

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a chauffeur in conservative livery shot out between the gates, turning south. The coachman pointed in its direction as he responded.

"You see? That's gone down to Mr. Moberley's office now to get him, and when he comes home maybe you can have a word with him before I take him out for his drive. He hires everybody personally who works on the place here. Until just lately he used to take the subway uptown and then horses was good enough for him; I reckon they are now, in his heart, for Mr. Moberley's a quiet, simple gentleman for all his money, but he's trying to get up to date. I shouldn't wonder if I lost my own job here before long, along with Prince and Princess!" He passed a caressing hand down the mare's sleekly glistening neck. "Mr. Moberley pensions everybody, man or beast, who has ever worked for him, though, so I'm safe for my old age anyway."

Sergeant McNulty tried a daring shot in the dark.

"Maybe it's because he's thinking of getting married, and folks usually kind of spruce up then."

His tone was idly speculative, but the coachman's friendly countenance changed.

"Where did you hear all this?" he demanded gruffly.

McNulty smiled, but his heart gave a sudden leap. Could that shot have found a mark?

"I've had to turn my hand to a lot of odd jobs to make my living since I came to town and one of them was running an elevator, or trying to!" he replied with mild ingenuousness. "I've no knack for mechanics, but before I was fired the fellow who ran the next elevator

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to mine got real friendly. It was him who told me about Mr. Moberley and how good he was to everybody. He used to work in one of the great millionaires' hotels, and Mr. Moberley called on a lady who stopped there for a little while. My pal said she was beautiful, a regular swell."

"If anybody likes black hair and skin like white plaster, with a mouth that looks as if some one had crushed a handful of ripe strawberries against it——!" The coachman checked himself, flushing darkly, and after a pause he added: "I've heard nothing about Mr. Moberley getting married, but if you want a job here, village gossip don't go! When he comes I'll put in a word for you——"

Again he paused, this time glancing over McNulty's shoulder and, turning, the latter found himself gazing into the bland, unrecognizing eyes of Peter Sayre.

The erstwhile journalist, clad in his disreputable brown suit, stood diffidently holding out a note in a long envelope and after reading it the coachman scrutinized him carefully.

"You don't look as if you understood much about horses, my man, but Mr. Moberley's order goes, of course, and I'll give you a trial." He turned to McNulty. "Sorry, but that place you wanted is filled. Just you call at Mr. Moberley's office to-morrow morning, though, and he'll get you something else to do. He never was known to turn a deserving man down."

The detective murmured his thanks with a dejected air and moving off without deigning a second glance at Pete,

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he went down the drive, cut across the main road and started in the direction of the subway near which he had observed a small lunchroom.

His shot in the dark had been pure invention, with no particular woman in mind. It had been the result of the detective instinct and long training and almost mechanically he had inquired for the possible woman in the case but the coachman's response and laconic description left him with a graphic, swiftly imprinted picture on his memory; the vision of the woman who had entered Seward Moberley's private office that morning as he himself departed. The aged financier's exclamation of delighted, almost fatuous surprise rang once more in his ears. Who could this woman be? Had she anything, however innocent, to do with the menace which threatened the great man?

Dusk was already falling, the air was chill, and, although the sky was clear, a cold wind had sprung up which made him grateful for the warmth of his rough overcoat. He found the humble little restaurant, ordered a beef stew and had consumed half of the greasy contents of the bowl when some one entered and the chair opposite his was pulled out without ceremony.

"Hello, you old left-hander!" Pete's exasperatingly cheerful voice hailed him. "I stole a base on you that time, didn't I?"

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CHAPTER III

AMONG WHISPERING TREES

McNULTY surveyed his friend with mingled emotions across the dingy little table and finally a grin broke over his lantern-jawed countenance.

"I've got to admire your nerve, anyway, Pete!" he exclaimed. "Where did you get that note you gave the coachman? You don't mean to say you interviewed Seward Moberley in his office?"

"Just that!" The other grinned in response. "He never refuses to see an applicant, you know, nor turns a deserving man down. *You* couldn't get a job from him that would let you inside his grounds for he knows you are a dick and he has refused police protection; you told me that yourself. On the contrary, I'm an honest man out of work and with a sick child on my hands, and it was almost too easy! Moreover, I smoked out your secretary and the blonde stenographer. The girl stumps me, but your hunch about the secretary was right. He's using his real name, Talbot Quinn, so that looks as if he were running straight if he ever was guilty. Do you remember his case?"

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McNulty shook his head and Pete went on:

"Oh, I forgot! You were out West then after the driver of the Hale death car. Quinn was the cashier who was supposed to have wrecked the Alien Investors' Bank, but there was such popular doubt of his guilt that he was given an indeterminate sentence and pardoned a short time after. Moberley took him on to give him a fresh start, I guess. He's a fine old chap, my new boss, and if that letter wasn't a hoax you'll find a homicidal maniac on your hands to-night or I'll never make another prediction!"

"You are wasting your time, Pete!"

"Not I!" his companion retorted. "I'll be in at the death, if there is any, to-night! Don't forget that!—Girlie, bring me a cup of coffee and any dish you've got that's hot and ready."

He added the last to the languid waitress who had approached and after finishing their meal they strolled back to the Moberley place. Darkness had fallen but they separated a block from the great gates after planning a point of meeting inside the grounds when Pete should have explained to the coachman the hastily concocted reason for his failure to produce the bag of personal belongings he had ostensibly gone for, and had been assigned to sleeping quarters.

McNulty, meanwhile, secreted himself behind a tree on the public road and timed the perfunctory patrol of the private watchmen attached to the estate. Once the precinct policeman passed on his beat and once the detective caught a glimpse of one of the plainclothes men de-

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tailed from headquarters for special duty beginning that night and he grinned to himself. It was no part of his plan to make his presence known to the latter, and waiting until he had disappeared and the coast was clear McNulty scaled the broad, low wall, dropped into a clump of thickly massed shrubs and remained motionless for some minutes.

There was no moon but the stars were shining with a radiance undimmed by clouds, and now and then the searchlight from some steamer on the river far below sent up a long sweeping finger of light. The chill night wind stirred the branches of the trees about him until they shivered and whispered eeriely and in spite of himself a sensation of awe and suspense stole over McNulty's steady nerves as, taking advantage of the deeper shadows, he crept nearer and ever nearer to the great, ghostlike outlines of the house silhouetted against the sky.

"Seward Moberley will be killed. You cannot stay the hand . . ." The words returned to ring with a portentous note in McNulty's ears and no longer did the terse, positive statement seem the message of an idle crank. Rather did it now appear as a solemn warning of doom inevitable, the forerunning shadow of the hand of fate which could neither be stayed nor turned aside from its grim purpose by a mere handful of the law's guardians. For the first time in his career as street urchin, ex-pug—an ingloriously terminated interlude—flatfoot, precinct detective and finally member of the homicide squad with a brilliant record of man-hunting behind him, Jim McNulty felt a thrill of something akin

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to superstitious fear; not for himself but for that blindly trusting man who, fanatically secure in his faith in his fellow beings, sat alone, behind the shrouded windows through which a faint light gleamed, on the ground floor of that silent house.

As noiselessly as a cat McNulty circled it, mechanically noting the great entrance with its sweeping driveway and white-pillared porch and the side and back doors with their pergola and porte-cochère. Once he heard a man's heavy breathing and slipped back behind a stout tree just in time to avoid the circling light of an electric bull's-eye which revealed to him the thickset features of Donlin, another of the headquarters' men.

Donlin had followed him intrepidly into more than one haunt of desperate crooks in the past, and they had weathered a crisis or two together where a single false move would have meant instant extermination, and yet to-night McNulty read upon the other's face an open expression of the same vague and formless dread which had obsessed himself. It was as though terror stalked beside them, premonition before, and death for another skulked behind.

In vain McNulty strove to shake off the mood which had descended upon him; in vain he reminded himself of the efficiency of the force of which he was proud to be a member, and held up in derision before his own mental vision the futile psychology of the crank letter writers whom he had helped to track down. The nameless suspense still hung over him and could not be exorcised.

With it, too, he was suddenly conscious of a craving

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for human companionship. The chief had left it to his own discretion to make himself known to the squad sent up to guard the threatened financier and there was no reason why he should not have signaled to Donlin——

McNulty pulled himself up abruptly. Was he turning coward that he could not patrol a gentleman's estate at night without a guardian himself? He had made up his mind that he would play a lone hand so far as the special guard was concerned unless the need for concerted action arose; and besides, there was Pete already probably waiting for him in the cluster of sumac behind the garage.

Methodically he forced himself to count the windows of the old mansion, measuring with a practiced eye their width and distance from the ground, and, as he did so, the shrouded light in what he took to be either the dining-room or library was extinguished and another sprang up in a row of tiny-paned windows on the second floor. And still there was no sound from within, no footfall or voice penetrated those solidly built, century-old walls.

Retreating beneath the low-hung, rustling branches of a maple tree, McNulty pulled out his watch and glanced quickly at the illuminated dial. It seemed to him that ages had passed and yet the hands pointed only to half-past nine. Still, Pete might be waiting; there couldn't be much for the stable hands on duty to do to amuse themselves at night, and, being a new man, the latest employee might very well plead off from a game of cards or some kindred diversion and go to bed early, providing his sleeping quarters were over one of the stables.

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Getting out again might be another matter, particularly if he had to share his room with some one else, but McNulty had no fears for Pete's ingenuity on that score; he had seen his friend wriggle out of tighter situations than the present one.

Cautiously he made his way to the garage and around its vine-clad wall to the back. A slight movement in the sumac bushes, too steady and long sustained to have been caused by a gust of the fitful wind, came to his ears, and, stooping, McNulty picked up two dry sticks and rubbed them softly together, in a scraping rhythm with pauses between.

It was the signal agreed upon between them and almost at once Pete's head appeared from among the lower branches and he crawled out on his hands and knees. When at last he stood upright he laid a warning finger across his lips and led the way around the bushes to one of the smaller outbuildings where a jutting shed concealed them from view.

"Where the deuce have you been?" he demanded in a resentful whisper as they halted. "I've been waiting for hours under those confounded bushes and some ancient bones that the watchdog must have hidden there waited with me! I feel as if I'd been in a graveyard after an earthquake!—Have you seen anything suspicious? I'm hanged if I know why, but my nerves are all on edge."

"You've nothing on me!" McNulty laughed shortly under his breath. "It's that letter and the waiting and the stillness——"

"'Stillness!'" the other ejaculated, interrupting him.

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"I wish to heavens it *was* still! It's the eternal rustling of the dry leaves on the trees in this breeze that sets a fellow's teeth on edge when he's waiting for he doesn't know what!—But I got a lot of dope on Moberley from that coachman, Parker, who isn't a bad sort and loyal as they come, just as you said he was. The old gentleman is as methodical in his daily life as a machine; goes to his office in his car every morning precisely at half-past eight, home at four except on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays, when after office hours he calls personally on the poor, whom he visits on foot or in public conveyances. He is always home for dinner at seven and until lately spent all his evenings at home. On Thursdays and Sundays his nephew, Charles Moberley, dines with him and sometimes brings a friend named Russell, whom Parker disapproves of; considers him a bit of a scapegrace as far as I could gather. Every afternoon that he returns before the dinner hour Mr. Moberley drives out in that old victoria you saw this afternoon."

"You say he has spent all his evenings at home 'until lately,'" McNulty repeated. "What did Parker mean by that?"

"Well, within the last month or so—I couldn't get him to be more explicit than that without arousing his suspicions concerning my curiosity—he says that Mr. Moberley has been going out on Wednesday and Saturday evenings, on foot, and returning about eleven o'clock."

"And while we're gabbing under this shed he may be murdered!" McNulty ejaculated. "If you haven't got

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any more important dope than that we'd better be moving."

He led the way this time and his companion followed, creeping under the shrubbery and darting from one wide-branching tree to another. They came upon three of the cordon of police which were drawn up about the grounds and although the detective could have eluded them with the ease of his long training in evading the notice of less desirable citizens, his journalistic friend fell foul of the first they encountered and McNulty was compelled to reveal his presence and explain that of the disgusted Peter. The same scene was enacted with the second, and as they left him the reporter remarked in chagrin:

"The whole force must be up here! It would be a fine night for a murder anywhere else on Manhattan Island!"

"Well, if you must tramp like an elephant rampaging through the jungle——!" McNulty was beginning, but the other interrupted him with a snort:

"Elephant nothing! I won't get any beat here to-night for it's a pipe that old Moberley is as safe as a church! I'd like to see even a stray cat get through these grounds without one of those confounded flatfeet stopping them!—What's that moving in the trees there?"

A shadow had detached itself from the greater one formed by a group of Japanese maples beside the porch and Donlin's gruff voice demanded:—

"Hands up, you murdering devils, before I plug you full of holes!"

There was the ugly glint of a pistol in the starlight

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and one hand flew to his lips with the police whistle, but McNulty whispered hurriedly:

"Easy there, Donlin! Look before you start anything!"

"Lord, it's you, Sergeant!" The policeman saluted sheepishly and pocketed his pistol. "I don't want to flash my lamp so close to the house, but who's that with you? The captain gave me strict orders——"

"It's my friend Sayre, of the *Despatch*, and he's here by Captain Hardy's special permission," McNulty explained coolly. "You were not so sharp on the job a while back when you flashed your bull's-eye within an inch of my face and never spotted me. Moreover you were breathing so hard that any crook a block off could have side-stepped you!"

"'Twas you!" Donlin ejaculated in a hoarse whisper. "I might have known it, for the captain told me to expect you up here, but I hadn't seen hide nor hair of you, Sergeant, and well we know that you have your own way of going about a thing! It was early in the evening and I'm not looking for any trouble till along about midnight, anyway, but I'm used to the city streets with a good solid pavement under my feet and a lamp post here and there and straight rows of houses on each side of the way. These woods have got me going!"

"What time is it now?" Pete asked under his breath. "It seems as if it ought to be nearly morning!"

"Just ten," McNulty announced as the great clock over the stable door boomed out the strokes. "Anything stirring about the house, Donlin?"

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"No, sir. I went up on the porch and looked in through a gap in the window shade at the old gentleman and he was sitting in his library as calm as you please, reading. A little later he got up, put his book on the table and went out of the room. I guess he went to bed, for a light shone out over the porch roof from above. I was turning away when an old chap dressed in rusty black as though he was going to a funeral came doddering in, put the book away in the case against the wall, wheeled the chair back from the table—it's a big, upholstered one and I thought to myself that he'd maybe fall over into it, he seemed that feeble!—and turned out the light. I watched real careful so that I could hand in a detailed report later if any trouble should come, but that's all I saw. There's not been a sound or a move from the house since, but the light's still going upstairs as you can see for yourself, Sergeant."

Donlin paused, breathless from the length of his account and McNulty glanced up at the second floor of the house. Its front was softly illuminated at the corner near which they stood and several windows at the side gave forth a shrouded glow, while on the third floor at the back a single light gleamed through the shade.

"All right, Donlin. You've got men at the back and side doors?"

"I have, sir, and at every window that a man could reach from the ground," the policeman responded grimly. "There's not a soul that'll get in or out of the house this night without our nabbing him!"

"Well, don't nab us if we should come near you again

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and don't shoot on sight or blow that whistle till you're sure it isn't one of your own boys!" laughed McNulty in cautiously low tones. "You might scare off the guy you're after and then we'd have another night's work."

"I hope not!" Donlin declared fervently. "Put me in the railroad yards or on the wharfs or up the darkest alley that ever was made for the convenience of thieves and it's just my meat, but I never was on park duty and waiting around here gets my goat for fair. I'll look out for you if you and Mr. Sayre show up again, Sergeant, and make no more mistakes."

McNulty and Pete withdrew into the trees once more and the policeman resumed his cautious but heavy-footed patrol. The light still glowed from the second floor of the great house, but that at the rear of the third was extinguished after about half an hour and dead silence reigned, broken only by the soughing of the wind.

The detective,and his friend had stationed themselves at a point of vantage from which they commanded a view of those lighted windows and yet would not be directly in the path of those who were guarding the house. Occasionally a gleam like that of a firefly, flashing out about the wider expanse of the grounds even as far as the gates and the stretch of low wall which separated the estate from the main road, showed that the chief's cordon was indeed far-flung and on the alert. Surely, as Pete had said, not even a stray cat could gain entrance unmolested that night! Yet, curiously, that sensation of suspense, of waiting for he knew

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not what, remained with Jim McNulty, and, as the hours dragged slowly by, the nameless, almost superstitious dread increased rather than diminished.

The stable clock sounded eleven and then twelve, but still there was no snapping of the tension which held them. During the last hour there had been little talk between the two, but as midnight rang out Pete stirred restlessly.

"I'm beginning to feel like Donlin!" he muttered. "You and I have weathered many a vigil together, Jim, but there's something about this one that makes me feel like a kid lost in the dark. I had an idea that if anything was going to happen to-night it would come before midnight; wonder what old Moberley is doing behind those lighted windows until this hour, anyway! Parker says he always goes to bed early the evenings he stays at home."

"Look here!" McNulty exclaimed abruptly. "Didn't you tell me Parker said that Mr. Moberley was in the habit lately of going out on Wednesday and Saturday evenings? This is Wednesday—or was until a few minutes ago. I wonder why he changed his routine this of all nights?"

"By Jove, yes! That never occurred to me!" Pete, who had been leaning against a tree straightened all at once. "Do you suppose he had more than an inkling as to the identity of that letter writer, or at least the person referred to in it? Could he have remained at home purposely to meet him face to face?"

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But that hypothetical question was destined not to be answered that night. It came at last, that for which they had long waited; a quavering, high-pitched scream in an elderly, masculine falsetto of mingled horror and fear rang out suddenly upon the stillness of the air, to fall and rise again, echoing among the whispering trees!

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CHAPTER IV

THE BRONZE SWORD

WITH the first note of that horror-stricken cry from the house, the two watchers under the clump of maples started as though electrified and set off at a dead run for the house. Lights from bull's-eye torches were springing up now all over the grounds, and shouts and the crashing of feet through the shrubbery came to their ears.

On the porch they encountered Donlin vainly pounding at the great entrance door, but McNulty, with no scruples such as beset his subordinate, summarily kicked in one of the windows which reached to the level of the floor and entered with Pete and the policeman at his heels.

The room in which they found themselves was in darkness, but the faint light that streamed down the hall stairs revealed its huge dimensions and the massive, old-fashioned furniture scattered about. Even as he made for the door leading into the hall, McNulty noted the great chair wheeled back from the table and the book-cases which lined the walls; it was evident that this was

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the room of which Donlin had spoken—the room in which Seward Moberley had been seated until a few hours before.

The hideous quavering scream sounded again from above as they tore up the stairs and guided them to a brilliantly lighted room at the front of the house where a little, old man in a shabby dressing-gown cowered tremblingly beside a table, his face livid and his veined, withered, claw-like hands outstretched toward a figure which lay back quietly in a huge arm-chair.

So quietly, so placidly did Seward Moberley rest that it would seem at first glance as though he had fallen asleep and his dream were a wholly pleasant one, for a slight smile curved his fine, mobile lips, upon which a bluish tinge had settled. Gazing downward, they saw that the front of his gray dressing-gown was stained with crimson and from between its folds at the breast there protruded a tiny shaft of bronze with a miniature hilt at its end.

Blood was spattered, too, upon the blotter of the writing pad on the table before him, where it had spread in widened circles which were rapidly turning brown; it had stained the blue quill of the pen in its sand-filled receptacle and tipped the shining blade of the brass paper cutter beside it. Nothing else in the room seemed to have been disarranged and there appeared no sign of an intruder.

Donlin was shaking the distraught old manservant and trying to bring him to a semblance of coherence, while McNulty took in the details of the scene at a hasty

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glance and then moved quietly across to the still figure in the chair, over which Pete was already bending.

"He's not dead yet," the latter murmured. "Don't touch that dagger or whatever it is, though; when it is withdrawn it'll be all over with him! Perhaps we can get some sort of a statement from him first."

His reportorial instincts were uppermost now that the grueling strain of suspense was at an end and the blow had fallen, but McNulty cried sharply to Donlin:

"A doctor, quick! Make that old fool tell you where the telephone is!"

The butler, however, was too dazed with horror and grief to realize what was being said to him, and a broken feminine voice replied instead from the doorway.

"There's an extension to the house telephone in Mr. Moberley's bedroom in there, sir, but it would be quicker if Bennett went with the car for him, if Mr. Moberley's been took sick. Oh, whatever is the matter with him, please, sir, and why is George carrying on so?"

They turned to see a stout elderly woman, her shapeless form clad in a bathrobe and wisps of gray hair straying from an aureole of crimpers about her round face, peering in at them with an expression of curiosity mingled with affectionate concern. It changed to horror as she caught a glimpse of that which lay in the great chair, and she started forward, but Pete held her back while McNulty dashed for the connecting door leading into the room she had indicated, just as the tramp of many heavy feet sounded upon the stairs.

The detective called up headquarters, acquainted the

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anxious Captain Hardy briefly with the facts of the tragic affair as they were then known and rang off without waiting to listen to his superior's explosive wrath. He was burning with the fires of humiliation and failure, for although that fine old gentleman dying in the next room had declined his protection he had nevertheless been sent to guard him from a specific menace, and even then he and Donlin and the whole cordon of police had not succeeded in "staying the hand."

The words of that mysterious letter came to him again as he reëntered the lounging-room and he hurriedly approached Donlin, who was conferring with a group of his men in the doorway. The woman, herself crying silently, had drawn the aged butler aside and was endeavoring to quiet his moans, and Parker, the coachman, in an ulster hastily donned over his night clothing, stood guard over his employer like a faithful dog over a fallen master.

"Look here, Donlin, I don't know how much the chief told you, but when we were tipped off about the possibility of just what has happened we were warned that if we acted quickly enough we might catch the guilty party. I hope all the boys haven't trouped up to the house instead of keeping a lookout in the grounds for some one who might be trying to escape——!" McNulty was beginning, but the other cut him short.

"There's a whole squad left out in the grounds and along the Drive beyond the walls, with orders not to come to the house whatever happens, and they're beating up every bush and tree, and routing out the stables

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and garage and outbuildings this minute, Sergeant! I've sent Bennett—that's the chauffeur—off with the car for the family doctor. Did you find the 'phone, sir?"

"Yes; I talked to Captain Hardy and he'll be up himself to take personal charge if—when——" McNulty hesitated, glancing toward the great chair, and as if in answer Seward Moberley stirred and opened his eyes with a faint fluttering of their sunken lids.

Peter Sayre, who had been strolling about the room as silently as a cat, reached the wounded man's side as quickly as McNulty himself and the coachman stepped back a pace. Donlin, too, had approached but before either he or the detective could speak the butler broke from the stout woman's grasp and flung himself on his knees at the foot of the chair.

"Oh, sir, who did it?" he wailed. "Who—who hurt you like this?"

The graying lips parted, but for a moment no words came. Then after a visible effort the merest whisper gasped out upon the electrified silence.

"It is—you, George? Why have you put—lights out?"

The butler gazed about at the brilliantly illuminated room and the circle of tense faces and a sob tore its way from his throat, but he replied chokingly:

"They—they just went out, sir! Something wrong—downstairs. Tell me, sir, *tell* me who has done this to you! You've been stabbed, sir!"

Seward Moberley nodded slowly and one slim hand

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fluttered toward his breast where the ugly bronze blade protruded, but it fell inertly back once more to his side. A faint gurgle came from his throat and his whole body seemed to slump in his chair. Could it be that he would die without speaking those vital words? Was he already gone?

McNulty took a desperate step forward, but at that instant the man in the chair made a last supreme effort and rallied.

"It was no one I ever saw before." His voice rang out strongly, without a tremor. "A man—gray hair—cap pulled down over eyes. Don't know how—got in. Said just four words—I remember, perfectly conscious now—said: 'One out of way!'—and struck!" There was a pause filled only with the sound of the stertorous breathing and then he spoke once more. "George, where are you? There is something torturing me—here!"

Before the butler could speak, before any of those grouped about him could realize his intent or the power which lay behind that last flicker of strength, Seward Moberley raised his hand swiftly, unerringly to the sword-shaped dagger and, drawing it from his breast, he sank back in his chair for the last time, with that little lingering smile still playing about his parted lips.

For a long minute no one stirred or spoke and it was only gradually borne in upon them that the raucous breathing had ceased, when the silence was broken by a single subdued but deep-toned note from the stable clock, as solemn as the tolling of a church bell.

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