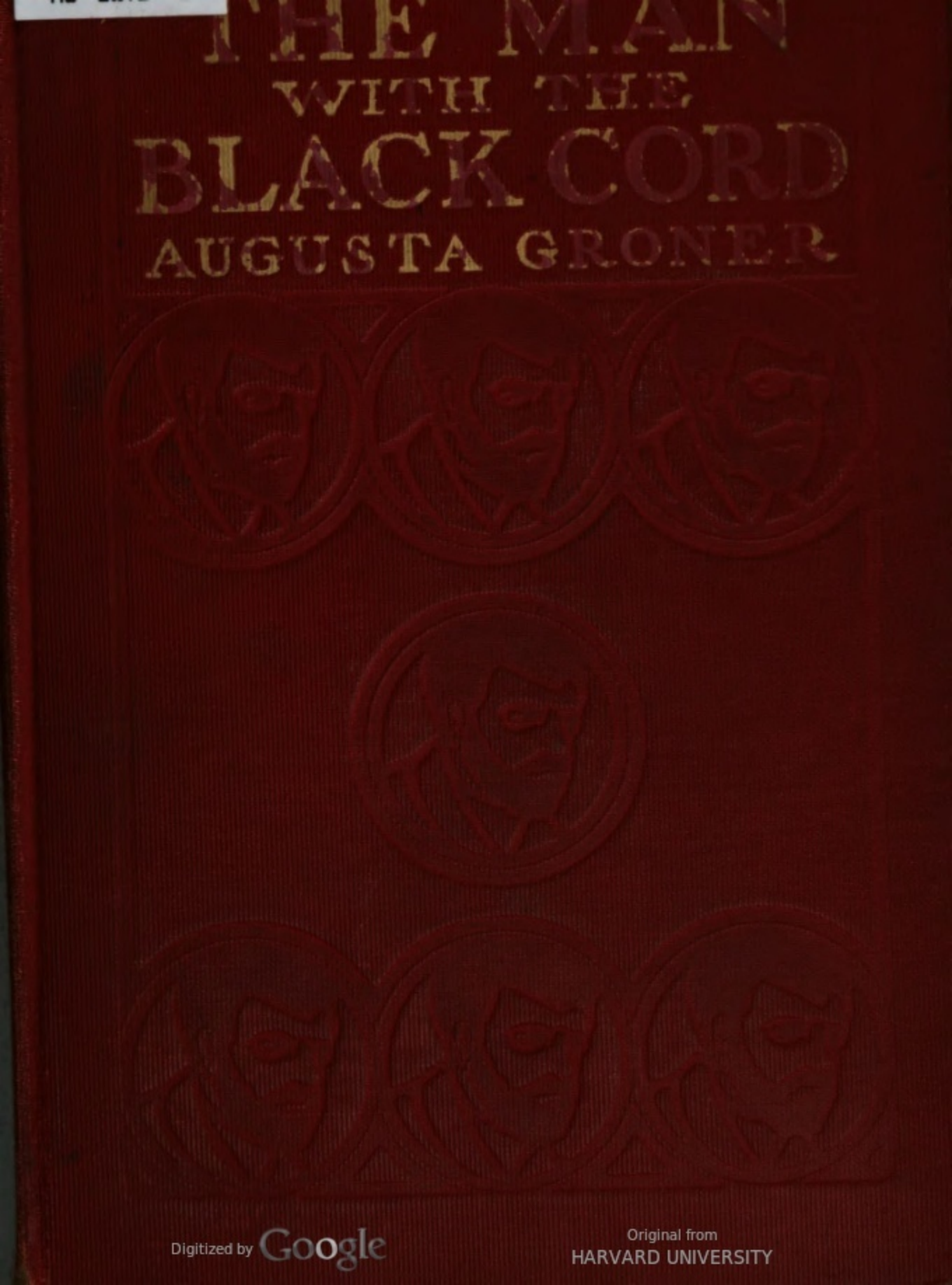
THE MAN WITH THE BLACK CORD

AUGUSTA GRONER



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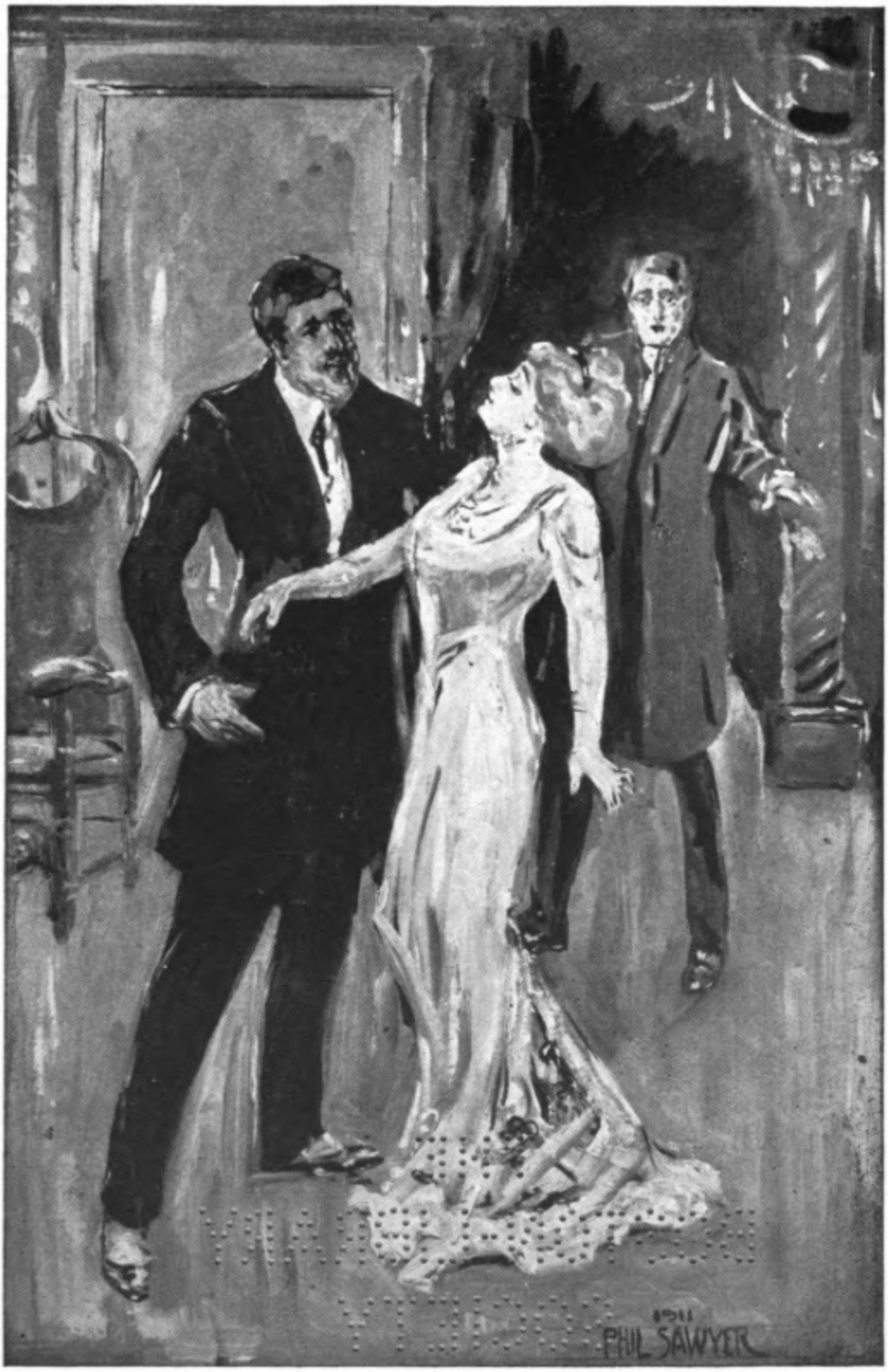

"Before her brother could catch her she fell to the ground unconscious" *(frontispiece)*

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THE MAN WITH THE BLACK CORD

BY

AUGUSTA GRONER

AUTHOR OF "JOE MÜLLER: DETECTIVE"

TRANSLATED BY

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1911

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THE MAN WITH THE BLACK CORD

CHAPTER I

LEOPOLD ERLACH DISAPPEARS

THE little hamlet of Inzersdorf, near Vienna, enjoyed the melancholy distinction of being one of the very few spots in the vicinity of the Austrian capital which could not lay claim to natural beauty. The dusty straggling little village existed mainly for the sake of the great brick-works which were its chief industry. There were few people in Inzersdorf living there from choice. Almost everybody had something to do with the brick-works or with the official administration of the village.

But here and there on the dreary expanse of open fields and moors lay the oasis of a private garden or small park, surrounding its dwelling house, and in its turn hidden from the passersby on the high-roads by tall brick walls.

Among these homes of greater ease, the Erlach mansion was one of the oldest and best known. The house itself, imposing in structure in spite of its one and a half stories only in height, was of the solid build of a former century, and had its every door and window guarded by heavy iron bars. The slow growth of many years had enwrapped the severity of

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its exterior in a mass of rich-toned green, half a dozen different clinging plants striving for a place there. This rather unusual completeness of nature's encroachment gave the building the popular name of the "Green House."

Mr. Leopold Erlach, the owner of this attractive property, was neither popular nor gregarious. Few visitors passed the heavy gates in the high brick wall that enclosed the pleasant well-kept garden with its wealth of flower-beds under spreading trees.

On a bright September morning, warm even for the season although following a night of storm the "Green House" dozed in its customary quiet. The gardener moved silently about the grounds at his task of gathering up the leaves and twigs torn down by the night wind. Within the kitchen, Mrs. Teresa Tonner, Mr. Erlach's cook and housekeeper, stood at the table preparing her master's breakfast tray. Her movements were slow and heavy, and the expression of her worn and haggard face, which yet gave evidences of refinement beyond her station, was more than usually distraught and uneasy. She caught herself two or three times in little forgetfulnesses of the daily routine, even in such a simple matter as preparing the breakfast, and it took a visible effort for her to pull herself together.

She was well aware of the fact that any carelessness coming to Mr. Erlach's notice might cost her her place. For this elderly bachelor was a very particular and exacting employer and there were many changes in his household force. The few people who had occasion to observe it were rather surprised that a woman of so sensitive a nature as Mrs. Tonner should have endured his eccentricities for nearly two years.

When the tray was finally ready and carried into the dining-room, Mrs. Tonner was relieved to find

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that Mr. Erlach was not already seated there, as was his usual custom. It gave her time to cast a last glance around and to see whether everything was in order. Then she returned to her own room, which lay between the kitchen and the dining-room and through which she had to pass when going to and fro between these rooms. She left the door into the dining-room open that she might hear Mr. Erlach when he came out from his own bed-chamber.

Mrs. Tonner sank down into a chair, and her eyes, full of a dreary despair, glanced abstractedly about the neat little apartment. Suddenly she started, a quick flush mounted to her faded cheeks and she sprang from her seat. She had caught sight of a bright-colored piece of silk, a man's neck muffler, which lay thrown over the arm of the sofa. She snatched it up and threw it into a cupboard drawer, looking about uneasily.

Then she relaxed into troubled thought again, until suddenly the realization that Mr. Erlach had not yet entered the dining-room penetrated her consciousness. She glanced at the clock and saw that the tray had been standing on the table for fifteen minutes. She rose, took the hot milk and the coffee back to the kitchen and put them on the stove. Then she went to her own room again, but a feeling of growing uneasiness would not let her rest. Such a change in her employer's methodical habits was unprecedented.

Mrs. Tonner walked slowly into the dining-room and stood there waiting and listening for some noise from her master's apartment. In the utter stillness of the heavy-walled house her own breath seemed to stop, as she stood there with her hands pressed to her heart. Then, as if driven by some impulse she could not understand, the woman moved forward slowly until she found herself in the hall in front of the bedroom door. Here she knelt with her ear to

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the keyhole and listened again. Not a sound, no moving about, not even a breath, came from within.

The kneeling woman rose suddenly to her feet and fell back against the doorjamb, her face ghastly pale, her lips parted in a gasping sob. Her heart stood still before the sudden horror that had seized it. She controlled herself with an effort and turned the doorknob resolutely. The door was locked on the inside, another most unusual thing. But in spite of its unusualness this fact seemed to bring relief to Mrs. Tonner's mind. She moved quickly to the next door down the hall, which led into Mr. Erlach's study. This door also was locked on the inside and again Mrs. Tonner felt a surge of relief roll over her troubled mind.

But it was only momentary. The dread came back again and she beat at the door, rattling the knob and calling her employer's name loudly.

No sound came from within the closed rooms.

"Oh, what is it?—what is the matter?—what has happened?" exclaimed the woman.

She ran to the front door and found it locked as usual. The outer iron gate was also locked and the keys of both doors were presumably in their usual place on the little table near Mr. Erlach's bed.

The now thoroughly frightened woman hurried back to the dining-room and through it and her own room to the kitchen. The straight broad hall that ran the length of the house was divided two-thirds of its length by a cross-wall, so that it was necessary to go through the dining-room to reach the kitchen and the back door. As she passed through her own room, and also in the kitchen, Mrs. Tonner cast a glance of anxious scrutiny in every corner. Some hideous unspoken fear lay in her eyes, crushed down by a conscious effort of the will. She paused in the

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kitchen for a moment and then went to the back door of the house and called to the gardener.

Andreas Till, bending over a flower-bed, looked up with a start as he heard the woman's voice. For in spite of Mrs. Tonner's effort to control herself, the words came in a tone of agony.

"What's the matter?" cried Till, running up to the door.

"Mr. Erlach — he hasn't come out of his room — I don't hear him moving about —"

"Well what is there to be so frightened about in that?"

"Come — come to his room."

"Did you knock?"

"Of course."

"Well, come on, let's see what the matter is." In spite of his bluster the gardener felt the contagion of Mrs. Tonner's anxiety and he followed her into the house with a grave face.

They knocked and beat at the doors, shook the knobs and called loudly, but still there was no sound from within.

"Maybe — maybe he's gone out," murmured Mrs. Tonner between pale lips.

"I've been up since dawn," answered Till. "He's not gone out since then. Anyway, I opened the little gate myself an hour ago and it was bolted then. He couldn't have bolted it behind him."

"But — the great gate —"

"The iron bar was in its place — the bar that locks it from the inside, you know." As the gardener spoke he bent to look through the keyhole. He saw a pale glimmer of light within the darkened bedroom and the stale odor of heated oil came to his nostrils. The little night-light by the bedside was still burning.

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"The key is inside," said Till. "He hasn't left his room."

The two looked at each other with an anxious question in their eyes.

"I'm going to the factory to get a locksmith to open these doors. I'll ask them to telephone for the doctor too." With these words the gardener started on a quick pace back into the kitchen. Mrs. Tonner followed, panting.

"You needn't be so frightened," said Till when he saw her face in the bright light. "Old people like that can have a stroke easy or go off into a fainting fit."

"Oh — oh, let us pray that it's only a fainting fit," gasped Mrs. Tonner.

The gardener shook his head, surprised at the agony in her voice. "Why, you're all shook up — you'd better go over to my house — or I'll send my wife here to you. Hello, who's that?" he exclaimed as the bell of the back door jangled over their heads.

When the gardener had left the room, Mrs. Tonner sank into a chair, and dropping her arms on the table she buried her face in them, sobbing convulsively.

"Oh — thank God — thank God," she gasped between her sobs. "Both doors are locked from the inside — no one could get into his room — *no one* — it must be only that he is ill."

When Till and his wife came in a few moments later they were surprised at this evidence of emotion on the part of the usually silent, reserved woman.

"Don't take on so," said the gardener. "We'll have the doctor here soon. Volkner dropped in to see if there was any work for him after the storm, so I sent him over to the brick factory; he's younger and quicker than I am. He ought to find somebody

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there by this time, and we'll have those doors open in a jiffy."

Then the three sat down to wait in a silence broken only by Mrs. Tonner's gasping breath and an occasional murmur of sympathy from little Mrs. Till.

The brick factory was less than half a mile distant from the Erlach property and in a short time the assistant gardener, Volkner, came running up the garden path, followed by a locksmith.

The group of frightened servants watched the operation of opening the door and then peered anxiously into the dimly lighted room. The shutters were tight closed on both windows, and the light that fell through the half opened door into the study beyond made a twilight in which the dying flame of the little night-lamp flickered pale.

The bed was empty.

The housekeeper hurried to the windows and threw open the shutters. Then she looked around her. Leopold Erlach was not in his bedroom.

Till went through into the sitting-room and in a moment his voice came to the listeners in a note of surprise and fear. "He's not here either."

"Not there either?" repeated Mrs. Tonner bewildered.

The locksmith, a young man with an intelligent face, held back Mrs. Till and Volkner in the corridor. "You stay where you are," he said. "There's something wrong here and you'd better keep out of it."

"It's enough to drive one crazy," said Till, mopping his brow.

Mrs. Tonner stood as if dazed and the gardener had to fairly push her back into the corridor. "You go in and look," he said to the locksmith. "I can't find him. He's gone."

"Then I don't see what good my looking can do.

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I've done all I can. I'm willing to give my testimony about the doors to the constable when he comes."

"Oh, yes, we must send for the constable — I don't know what I'm doing — it's all so queer," stammered Till. "Volkner, you run to the police station. I'd better stay here."

Mrs. Till went to the door with Volkner, while Mrs. Tonner, Till, and the locksmith remained in the room. The gardener brought a chair for Mrs. Tonner, who could hardly hold herself upright. Then they waited in silence while the shadow of suspense and fear sank down over the vine-wrapped house.

Chief Constable Kern came himself and heard the story from the three witnesses. Each had only the same simple facts to tell — all doors locked from the inside, iron bars at all the windows, and yet Mr. Erlach missing.

"It's a queer go," said Kern, "some of those bars at the windows must be looser than they look."

The constable entered the bedroom, taking the locksmith with him, while the others, at his command, remained in the corridor.

The bed had evidently been occupied but looked as if it had been vacated in haste. This was the only sign of disorder, however, and the two bunches of keys as well as Mr. Erlach's watch lay undisturbed on the little table by the bed. But there were no clothes to be seen anywhere, the suit and the underwear which he had had on the day before, even his shoes and socks, were missing, as well as the night-shirt which was usually laid ready for him on the bed.

In the sitting room, everything showed in its usual neatness — for Mr. Erlach was a most orderly old gentleman and exceedingly tidy about all his belongings. One-half of one of the high windows stood open, but the iron bars in front of it did not yield

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even to the pressure of two pairs of strong arms. Nothing larger than a cat could slip between these bars, so closely were they set into the window frames.

The two men examined every cupboard, closet and corner in either room, every place in which a living man, or a dead body might be hidden. There were no signs of Leopold Erlach anywhere, nor any clue to the manner in which he might have escaped, or been carried from his room.

"I don't see how it was done," said Kern—"he must have gotten out somehow—he wasn't a wizard."

"What's the matter here?" exclaimed a cheerful voice at the door.

"Oh, Doctor," said the constable, "we don't know what the matter is—unless it's a miracle that's happened."

"What did you send for me for then?" asked Doctor Bergmann. "Is Mr. Erlach ill?"

"No, sir, he's gone—nobody knows where or how." Then the constable detailed the case to the physician, his eyes the while following the movements of the locksmith who was carefully examining the fixtures and bars of all four windows.

The room was a corner one and had two windows each on two of its sides. In the other walls, one large door led into the bedroom, while another, a smaller one placed near the corner, opened out into the main corridor. Between this door and the nearest window stood a little table. Something on the table attracted the constable's attention and he walked over to it, followed by the other two men.

On the table stood a candlestick holding a half burned light, the wick of which was pressed down deep into the wax. Spattered drops of grease lay on the table top and on the leaves of an open book beside the candlestick. It was a large old-fashioned

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volume, a work of ancient history. It was held open by a letter weight, and three words, on different parts of the page, were underscored in ink. They were scattered words but they formed a complete sentence, the sentence:

He was here.

. . . . . .

A few hours later, the official police commission from Liesing, the County seat to which Inzersdorf belonged, had taken possession of the Erlach mansion, and was in official charge of the case.

Mrs. Tonner, and the gardener and his wife were examined again, but could tell nothing more than what they had told to Constable Kern and the physician.

Till was the last member of the household force to have seen Mr. Erlach. As he was passing the study window about 8 o'clock the evening before, his employer called to him and they had a short conversation about some work to be undertaken in the garden the following day. Mr. Erlach, Till said, looked extremely well and seemed very contented and happy.

Then the gardener and the housekeeper were questioned as to any relatives who should be informed of the occurrence. They both asserted that Mr. Erlach had had few intimate friends and only one relative to their knowledge. This was his nephew, Lieutenant Paul Erlach, who lived in Vienna and occasionally visited his uncle.

A telegram was sent to the address given, and about three o'clock that afternoon a good-looking and extremely bewildered young officer arrived in Inzersdorf. As he was the next of kin and only representative of the missing man, the police did not dare to undertake the opening of the safe without his presence.

Lieutenant Paul Erlach had nothing to say that could throw any light on the mystery. If there was

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any secret passageway from the room, a passageway which might have been known to the owner of the house, or to whoever it was that had carried him off, his nephew knew nothing about it. He also had very little to say, likewise from a lack of knowledge, about the missing man's financial standing. Paul Erlach was a frank, sincere nature, and had little in common with his crabbed and eccentric relative. The fact that he was his uncle's sole heir made their association doubly difficult to both. The elder man was of a petty and suspicious nature, and had his nephew given evidence of any affection or interest Leopold Erlach would doubtless have thought it an intentional flattery. Paul felt this and never came to see his uncle unless by special invitation. He considered himself as of no more importance than any other passing stranger in the house that would one day be his. Therefore he was not in a position to give any information as to what might or might not be missing from his uncle's safe.

The police commissioner opened the heavily barred door, and he and Lieutenant Erlach drew out the various drawers of the safe and examined their contents. The key to the safe had been found in its usual place on Mr. Erlach's key-ring by his bedside. And within the safe there was no sign of disturbance or robbery. Four or five of its deep drawers were filled to the brim with fresh new gold pieces of high value. In another compartment were several leather cases containing old-fashioned but costly jewelry. A bitter smile curved the young officer's lips as he saw all this wealth which his uncle had so carefully kept from his knowledge.

Still another compartment of the safe was filled with documents, securities, bonds and shares, and family papers. Among these last, quite at the bottom of the pile, was one labeled: "My will."

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"I wonder when we'll be able to open that," murmured one of the police officials.

The money, jewelry and documents were placed in a suit case, which was closed and sealed in the presence of the police commissioner and Lieutenant Erlach. Then after another thorough examination, Mr. Erlach's two rooms were also officially closed.

Mrs. Tonner informed the police commissioner that she did not care to remain another night in the house, with its grewsome mystery. The official told her that no objections would be made to her departure but that she must inform him as to her future address. He gave a sharp glance into her troubled eyes, then as she left the room, he motioned one of his men to follow her. He also told Till to delay the woman's departure until evening, by any means that would not arouse her suspicion. The gardener promised this, saying he would inform Mrs. Tonner that it was impossible for him to take her trunk to the station until a late afternoon train.

"I wonder why," thought the gardener to himself. In the two years of their living in the same establishment, neither Till nor his wife had become really acquainted with Mrs. Tonner. The woman's embittered reserve was calculated to arouse suspicion, but Till was a good soul and did not think it necessary to make any remarks to others about what might interest him.

When she had packed her trunk, Mrs. Tonner went over to the gardener's house to wait until he should be ready to accompany her to the railway station. Mrs. Till bustled about hospitably, preparing the supper. Mrs. Tonner had just drawn her chair up to the table, when suddenly her face flushed and she started up, taking a step or two in the direction of the door.

"What's the matter? Have you forgotten any-

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thing? Or is it something you wanted to say to the police?"

Mrs. Tonner shook her head, controlled herself and sat down at the table again. She tried to eat but it was only by a severe effort that she could force herself to swallow anything.

"I wonder what's the matter with her?" thought Till again. "She's not the scary kind, this thing shouldn't upset her so. What makes her so excited?"

But he said nothing to the police, for his good heart refused to let him add to the troubles of this woman whose unhappiness and distress were so evident.

When the time for the evening train approached, they walked to the station in silence, Till pushing the trunk on a wheelbarrow. When Mrs. Tonner entered the train, a man who had been sauntering up and down the platform stepped into the compartment after her. Till recognized him as one of the plain-clothes men who had come that afternoon from the police station, while Mrs. Tonner was in the gardener's house. Mrs. Tonner herself did not notice that she was being followed, so engrossed was she in the gloomy cloud of her own thoughts.

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CHAPTER II

THE MOTHER'S FEAR

A WEEK had passed since the disappearance of Leopold Erlach, and still the clouds of mystery hung black over the occurrence in the Green House. The local authorities seemed powerless to unravel the riddle. A thorough and careful search had been made of the premises and the entire vicinity, but Leopold Erlach, living or dead, was not to be found. Nor was there any clue as to how he could have disappeared from the locked room. No arrests were made, as there was no charge upon which to rest suspicion. The occurrence was the talk of Inzersdorf and the neighboring towns, and the Viennese papers gave considerable prominence to it as the mystery thickened.

One chill wet evening, a week after Mr. Erlach's disappearance, Teresa Tonner came hastily down the stairs and out of the door of a tall tenement house in a poor quarter of Vienna. She glanced furtively about her in the hallway and at the door, and seemed relieved as she saw how empty was the ill-lighted street. Mrs. Tonner's face was gray and the glance of her weary reddened eyes wavered as she drew her shawl closely around her and hurried along in the shadow of the houses. The woman looked old and haggard, crushed by some overpowing grief or anxiety. The distance she had to traverse was short but it seemed long to her troubled mind.

A block or two further on, she paused before the door of a cellar coffee room, one of the gathering

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places for the market people who came here in the early morning after bringing their wares from the country. At most other times of the day the dingy unattractive little room was empty.

When Mrs. Tonner descended the few steps and opened the door timidly, she found herself alone in the low-ceilinged, long, narrow space. A single gas flame threw a tiny radius of light beyond which was darkness. The room was empty and Mrs. Tonner came in so quietly that the people she could hear and see moving about in the kitchen beyond did not notice her entrance. She took a seat in the darkest corner, a place from which she could watch the door. She sat there waiting. Waiting in impatient anxiety, her eyes fastened, as if hypnotized, on the spot of brightness made by the metal doorknob. Finally, fifteen or twenty minutes later, the shining knob turned, and the door flew open. A young man entered hastily slamming the door roughly behind him. He was tall, and broad-shouldered although thin in figure, and his smooth-shaven face, even in the dim light, showed signs of dissipation. The furtive glance of his keen eyes was lacking in the candor and brightness which should belong to his years.

"Karl!"

The voice came out of the darkness and he peered through the gloom until he caught sight of the woman sitting there.

"Oh, you're there, are you?" he answered angrily. "Why didn't you creep into a rat-hole and be done with it?"

"That is what I would like to do," said Mrs. Tonner bitterly. "Come over here to me."

The young man laughed and replied in a lower tone, "Not much. I'm not over anxious to sit right under the gaslight either. And if we stay in that corner they'll light the lamp right over your head. If we

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go nearer the other light, it will be still dark enough, and they are not likely to burn extra gas for us two."

He moved over to another place and Mrs. Tonner followed him. She sat so that she had the light at her back and could see his face clearly. It was a face of good lines, which would have been noticeably attractive had it not showed all too plainly the marks of a life of dissipation. The woman's eyes seemed to drink in its every feature with a look of love that was like physical agony. In spite of the hollows drawn by years of sorrow and toil in her own face, there was enough resemblance between the two to mark them as mother and son.

"Did you just come too?" he asked.

"No, I've been here some time."

"And no one saw you yet?" he continued.

When she shook her head in reply he drummed on the table with a knife, and the door at the end of the room opened.

"Why, there's some one here," exclaimed an astonished voice as a young woman peered out from the kitchen.

Karl Tonner ordered two coffees and when the woman had returned to the kitchen he addressed his mother again, in a low but impatient tone. "Did you bring the money?"

Mrs. Tonner straightened up suddenly, the sadness in her face giving away to a look of determination mingled with burning anxiety.

"Why are you going away now? Why do you have to go so suddenly? What is it that is driving you away? Just now — now that —" She stopped and looked at him, her whole troubled soul in her eyes.

Karl stared at her at first in astonishment, then his eyes dropped, and he moved his hand mechanically over the tablecloth.

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"Answer me," commanded Mrs. Tonner.

The boy raised his head again with a look of defiance. "I'm going away because I happen to want to — because I can't find anything to do here — because I *have* to go away, if you must know. Anything more you'd like to ask?"

"Karl! —"

"Yes, that's my name."

"Then you have sunk — as low as that?"

"Pretty low — and it's your fault."

"Mine? — my fault?"

"Whose else? Who's going to help me if not my own mother?"

"Haven't I helped you many times?"

"But your affection appears to have a limit. You said just now —" Karl Tonner broke off his speech as the woman came out from the kitchen with the tray. After serving them she started towards the next gaslight but Karl motioned to her that it would not be necessary. The woman, who was quite pretty, smiled in answer to his impudent glance and left them alone again. Karl put his spoon in his cup, and began to pick off the skin formed by the hot milk, as carefully as if he hadn't another thought in the world. His mother clenched her fists and almost hissed through her closed teeth.

"What's the matter?" said Karl lazily.

"Everything," she began, in a tone that was low but pitilessly hard. "Yes, you are right. There *is* a limit to my affection. I seem now to be able to see clearer than a mother usually does. I have always been able to see your faults, and I see them all the more clearly now. Try as I may, I can find no excuse for them. You have not inherited them and I have done all I could to bring you up properly — to make an honest man of you. You have never heard me utter an untruth, you have never seen me idle or

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exacting — and yet you are a liar, you are lazy, seeking only your own pleasure — no matter at what price. No — don't interrupt me! If you don't want to drive me to despair, let me talk now. I sit here like a beggar woman — with my son who is no better than a tramp and a vagabond."

"Mother!" he hissed.

"It is the truth, my son," she exclaimed bitterly. "*You*, the grandson of a general, the son of a noble father, you are nothing but a tramp to-day — perhaps even worse, much worse."

"Mother! What do you mean? — what is it that you think me capable of then?" Karl's voice shook with anger in which there was a note of fear.

"I believe you — now — to be capable of — *anything.*"

The word was like a knife thrust. And the young man shuddered as he sat there, his face drawn, his hands clenched. Suddenly the blood that had rushed up to the roots of his hair went back again, leaving his face white. He leaned back in his chair, his hands dropped helplessly in his lap. The terror in his face was reflected in that of his mother.

"Capable of anything," she murmured with pale lips.

They sat for some few minutes in silence, a silence that was heavy with an unspoken horror. Finally the woman regained control of herself.

"I believe you capable of anything," she said again. "Of course you know why I am no longer in the Green House, why I am now living with my former cook.—" Again she paused. "Now you might speak and yet you will not," she continued, her lips trembling. "I can imagine why you sent that suspicious looking messenger to ask me to meet you here. You didn't dare to write me. You supposed

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that I would be under suspicion — that I would be watched — because I am your mother. Someone may have seen you the various times that you have visited me. It was five times in all and the last time — in that dreadful night — you came without letting me know beforehand — you climbed over the wall — and you went out that way too, because I could not get the key to the gate." Her voice dropped more and more towards the end of her sentence and her strength would have failed her, but for the firmness of her will.

Her son did not answer, did not attempt to defend himself.

"It is only *now* that I am forced to believe you capable of — *anything*," she began again, her voice growing harder. "Now that you tried to make me the instrument of your greed — of your criminal desires — now that you dared to demand of me that I should ask Erlach for money — and said that if he would not give it to me — *you* would get it from him. I do not know what it was you intended to do, to obtain money from a miser like Erlach. I did not ask you, I turned you from the door. When you had left me I fainted. I do not know how long I remained in that condition — and I do not know what happened during that time. I realize only now that you are the sort of a man who would force his way into a strange house to get what he wanted." She stopped and sat still, scarcely breathing. Still there was no answer from her son.

"I must get out into the air — I am ill," she murmured. She put her hand into the pocket of her dress and laid a purse on the table. "Here are five hundred crowns — you can get away with this. I have no more — I have helped you too often. In the purse is a slip with the address of Katie's sister.

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Write to this address when you have found some place where you are safe. Karl — I am going now — haven't you a word for me?"

Karl Tonner did not raise his head. He had neither a look nor a word for the mother who had sacrificed everything for him — for the mother who, brought up in a home of luxury, had worked for years in menial positions to support him in idleness.

She crept slowly to the door and turned back with a last look at her son, a look of unutterable love and unutterable sorrow. Then she went out into the wind and the rain, glad of the unfriendly elements that gave her strength again. Outside, she lingered for a few moments hoping Karl would follow her. When he did not come, she feared to attract attention by standing there and walked on slowly until she came to the open door of a church. Here, in a dark corner, she sank to her knees and breathed out the anguish of her soul in a sobbing passionate prayer.

. . . . . .

Karl Tonner sat for some time where she had left him, motionless. Finally he realized that he could not stay there forever. When he raised his head, his eyes looked dull and lifeless. He stretched out his hand to draw the purse to him, and saw through its red silk meshes that it contained a white slip of paper as well as the money. He opened the purse hastily and took out the paper with hands that trembled. He could not read the few words that were written there, for his eyes were dim with tears. Finally he managed to make out the writing.

"*My son:*

"My love, my prayers and my forgiveness will follow you wherever you may go. I am not strong enough to do what I *should* do perhaps and to accuse you openly. Save yourself and let me know when you are in security. But try to save your soul too, that I may not repent of my great love for you.

"YOUR MOTHER."

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Karl Tonner sat looking down at the slip for some time. Finally he put it back in the purse, laid a piece of money on the table and went out into the street. He wandered aimlessly about in the rain and the wind, heedless of the discomfort. His face was pale and his eyes dimmed with sadness.

Suddenly he realized what he was doing and looking about, found himself outside of the city, on the edge of an empty lot.— "Ridiculous! — how foolish of me," he murmured and turned brusquely. But in spite of himself his step dragged again and the same sentence that circled through his brain and had driven him out into the night, stood clear as if in letters of fire before his inward vision again. He dropped down on a stone by the wayside and buried his face in his hands, groaning aloud, "She believes me capable of *anything* — and Oh, God! it is true — it is true!"

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CHAPTER III

JOSEPH MULLER TAKES UP THE ERLACH CASE

TEN days after Leopold Erlach's mysterious disappearance, Dr. Franz Lehr, commissioner of the Criminal Police in Vienna, sat in his office in earnest conversation with his good friend Lieutenant Paul Erlach. The young lieutenant's attractive face looked worn and strained. After the usual first phrases Dr. Lehr asked the question that had been on his mind since his friend entered the room.

"You're not looking a bit well, Paul. Has your uncle's disappearance anything to do with it?"

"I don't mind *your* asking that," replied Lieutenant Erlach with a bitter smile. "But I'm afraid there are a number of people *thinking* that same question without asking it. Here, read this letter — the second of the kind that I have received. This is what brings me to see you this morning, not only a desire to chat with you."

"Well, I wondered," laughed Lehr. "But you really look as if this affair meant a lot to you. Now don't get angry — I mean it looks as if you were really greatly interested — and yet I understood that there was no particular love lost between yourself and your uncle."

"Quite right."

"Then what's the matter now?"

"These letters?"

"Anonymous letters?"

"Naturally. Letters like this are not usually signed."

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Lehr opened the envelope that was handed him. "A man's hand, disguised. What is it he has to say?"

> "Debts — card debts — other debts — difficult father-in-law — and a missing uncle — that's a rather good combination. The uncle will be found sooner or later — dead of course and no traces left by which anything could be discovered. Then the heir can come into possession of his fortune.
>
> "*Prost Mahlzeit:* One who knows."

"A rascal — and a cowardly one at that," said Lehr when he had read the letter. "When did you get this?"

"This morning."

"Will you leave it here with me?" the Commissioner asked. "And you haven't an idea who wrote it?"

"Not an idea. Not the faintest suspicion."

"But the clause about the father-in-law is news to me. I didn't know you were engaged. My heartiest congratulations."

"Can't accept them, I'm sorry to say. I am not engaged yet. I haven't even spoken to her.— Why should I? I don't want to bind her when I can't marry her — she shall be free."

"But you love each other — and there's someone who knows it — and who isn't pleased at the fact."

"Yes, I have thought of that already," said Paul.

"It was a natural conclusion. It will be more difficult — but not too much so possibly, to find out just who he is."

"How am I to do that?"

"With the help of the lady you wish to marry."

"Nellie?"

"Nellie's her name, is it? It's a pretty name. I suppose the lady herself is equally attractive."

Paul Erlach smiled up at his friend, a smile of hap-

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piness that was tinged with melancholy. "I shan't try to describe her. What's the good? What's the good even of *thinking* of her, it only saddens me."

"What's the trouble?"

"We can't either of us raise the money demanded by the law — her father — he's retired now, was my superior officer — went bond for a friend and got caught — what's the use of talking about it. But to this matter? How can I drag Nellie into this? How can she help us?"

"She can help us very much. I am taking for granted that this letter was written by a rival in love. What were the contents of the other letter you speak of?"

"Just about the same as this."

"Umph! the writer has very little imagination, and few ideas."

"It's postmarked Linz," said Erlach.

The Commissioner laughed. "That shows how little you know about those things. A letter can be sent from anywhere through a third party. Under the circumstances — the fact that you are not yet engaged I mean, the writer's knowledge of your interest in Miss Nellie — and hers in you, shows that he must be someone who is also interested in the young lady. She must know who her various admirers are — a woman always does. You ask her about it, it is the only way. Mercy, what's the matter! Why that deep sigh! Are you really so badly in debt?" The Commissioner bent over to look his friend in the eyes, a sincere sympathy in his own glance.

The lieutenant shook his head. "That's a lie about the card debts," he said sadly. "I got out of that by going more deeply in debt to a money-lender. It's a burden of course, but at least it's not a debt of honor. But how am I going to face Nellie and her father with a letter like this casting doubt on my honor?"

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"Now that's ridiculous," said Lehr calmly. "An anonymous letter hurts nobody, throws no slur on anybody but the writer. Your prospective father-in-law, if he's a man of sense, will tell you that also."

"But there's another thing," said Paul. "How do I know that the suggestions in this letter are not being circulated as gossip among my acquaintances? How do I know that malicious hints are not being thrown out — even going so far as to accuse me of having a hand in the disappearance of my uncle?"

"Yes, that's a more important side of it," said the Commissioner, holding out his hand to his friend. "Call on me if there is anything I can do for you in the matter. In fact I was about to ask you to put the case into our hands — although from another reason."

"What other reason?"

"This anonymous writer appears to know so much about your uncle's disappearance that it might be he had a hand in it himself."

"Oh — !"

"It is possible I say — I'm not yet ready to assert that it is probable —"

"Then you think we had better not ignore these letters?"

"We must not ignore anything that might in any way have to do with your uncle."

"That's true. I'll be very glad if you will give me your advice in this matter. You see here what the man says — 'The uncle will be found sooner or later — dead of course, and no traces left by which anything could be discovered. Then the heir can come into possession of his fortune.'"

Lehr interrupted hastily. "That is very important. Don't you see that this man is in possession of the fact that you are your uncle's only heir — a knowledge

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which lessens still more the number of those upon whom suspicion could fall. And here, here's another thing. You see this 'Prost Mahlzeit'? We use that very little in Austria. It's a north German expression altogether. Do you remember any of your friends in the habit of using it?"

Paul Erlach pondered a moment. "No," he said then, "I don't know of anyone. But there was something else I wanted to say to you. It concerns my uncle's disappearance."

"About which you probably know less than we do here. The local authorities haven't asked for any assistance in the matter as yet, but the case interests me and I have been following the developments closely. But I don't see just how I am going to help you there."

"You can help me by recommending a capable detective. I want a man — if there are such — who would take up the case not merely as a matter of professional duty but because it interests him. I've heard that there are such people."

"Yes, there are," said the Commissioner.

"But I suppose their services are very expensive!"

"Everything that's really good costs money. The men such as you describe are the rare talents that are sought for everywhere. Hold on, I know the man you want!"

"A capable man?"

"Capable? He's the best detective I ever knew or heard of."

"What's his name?"

"His name is very unimportant. He has a hundred names and a hundred different disguises, and in every one of them he has done marvellous things. But the name he was born to is Joseph Muller."

"A very ordinary sounding name."

"It suits the man's ordinarily quiet appearance.

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He left the official force some time ago, but he is still busy as a private detective."

"I don't suppose I could afford it," said Erlach, sadly. "Anyway I should have to suggest to him a rather peculiar method of payment."

"What do you mean?" asked Lehr.

Erlach flushed hotly and looked embarrassed. "I — you never thought of me as avaricious, did you?"

Lehr laughed. "The last person in the world — what's the trouble?"

"And yet I can't seem to think of anything else these days except uncle's money, and the fact that I am his heir and that he has never had any reason to disinherit me and that he has never hinted at any other disposal of his fortune. Now if he were *dead* — if we knew he were dead — but you see we don't know, we only know that he's disappeared — and that we haven't found him — and we may never find him — and if we don't, then thirty years have to pass before the state will hand the money out to me. Thirty years! — I'll be sixty-four then if I'm alive at all. I keep thinking of this all the time and — and I despise myself for doing so."

"There's no reason why you should," said the Commissioner. "It's perfectly natural of you to feel that way — anyone would in your position. I quite understand that it is a matter of the greatest importance for you to discover proofs of your uncle's death — if he *is* dead. And I think I know now what you mean by the peculiar method of payment. You mean you want a detective who will undertake the case on his own risk, because if he discovers proofs of Leopold Erlach's death you will then be in a position to pay him well. Am I not right?"

"Perfectly," said the Lieutenant with a faint smile. "And I'd much rather you'd say it than I."

"You're ridiculously sensitive," continued the Com-

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missioner, pressing a button on his desk. When the attendant entered Lehr said: "Call up No. 1234 and ask the gentleman if he can come here to my office."

"You must telephone Muller pretty often if you know his number so well," said Paul Erlach.

The Commissioner laughed and wrote out the numbers 1 2 3 4 on a slip of paper. "It's easy you see," he said, then turned to the attendant who re-entered.

"Mr. Muller will be here in twenty minutes," said the man.

Lehr nodded and turned to Erlach. "Can you wait?"

"I'll run across to the café to say a word to a friend who is waiting for me there, and I'll come right back."

"You'll find Muller a most original person. But you mustn't judge of other detectives from him. He's what you might call a white crow, a very remarkable man in every way. He is one of the really wise people in this world, those who understand everything and can forgive everything. He is almost a rich man now and has a very comfortable little home. I visit him occasionally and it is always a most enjoyable evening. The woman who has kept house for him for many years is a former thief who has served a term in prison. His coachman and his gardener are also released convicts. They'd go through fire for him."

"He certainly must be an unusual man."

"He is indeed, a man of remarkable capability. We'll not find another like him on the official force. We hated to have him go. But he has one serious fault."

"That's interesting, what is it?"

"His heart runs away with him."

"Why, what do you mean?"

"I mean that when he has discovered the criminal —solved the problem that no one else could solve,

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his capabilities. The young officer began at once: "First of all, Mr. Muller, I must explain to you that I am a poor man, and not in a position—"

"To pay for detective work?" Muller finished the sentence calmly. "Suppose we talk about the case, sir, and leave the unimportant details until later."

"But it isn't unimportant for me—this matter of putting myself under obligation to anyone," continued the young officer gravely. "Before I dare take advantage of your valuable services I wish to have it clearly stated that it is only possible for me to pay for them when, and *if*, my uncle's death is proven. If he is not dead it will be only possible for me to pay you slowly in installments, after I have worked off other debts, previously contracted. I feel that I must explain this first before taking up any more of your time." Erlach leaned back in his chair with a deep breath.

Muller smiled pleasantly. "Well, now you have explained it, Lieutenant, and I understand perfectly. Now let's talk about the important matters. What opinion have you formed about your uncle's disappearance?"

"Then you've been following the case in the papers? And haven't come to any conclusion yourself yet?" The detective shrugged his shoulders. "Neither have I," continued Erlach eagerly. "Although of course it is easier for me to overlook this case than it would be for you, as you know neither the person or the neighborhood in question."

A scarcely perceptible smile hovered on Muller's lips, a smile noticed only by the Police Commissioner whose eyes gleamed in response. Doctor Lehr took out his cigar case. "This looks to me as if it were going to be a lengthy conference," he said, "suppose we have a cigar."

"My uncle was a bachelor," continued Erlach.

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"The newspapers mentioned this point also. But what they did not mention was the fact that no woman has ever been concerned in his life at all. I am telling you this now, that you may not waste time in the usual search for the 'woman in the case.'" Muller bowed lightly and the young officer kept on with his report. "My uncle had no vices and very few secrets in his life. He was sixty-five years old when his mysterious disappearance occurred, and his life had been so absolutely commonplace that this happening is quite incomprehensible. As to his servants — the gardener Till and his wife, and his housekeeper, Mrs. Tonner, were the only ones there at the moment. The Tills had been with him for fourteen years. Mrs. Tonner had been in uncle's service only two years but she had proved herself faithful and willing, and had given many evidences of the fact that she was not in the least greedy for money."

"May I ask how you know all this about the servants?" put in Muller. "I understand that you were not on any terms of intimacy with your uncle."

Erlach sighed deeply. "It wasn't easy to get on with him," he answered. "He was distrustful and believed no good of anybody. If I showed friendliness or affection for him he would have taken it for toadyism, and yet he was continually accusing me of ingratitude and coldness of heart because I did not bother myself more about him. I don't see exactly how I could have done it. I've had very little time to myself since I have been here in Vienna, and I was stationed in Linz before that. My visits to Inzersdorf were necessarily few and far between. I can't say that I was anxious to make them any more frequent for they gave me no particular pleasure. But, when I *did* go there uncle's servants were his main topic of conversation. He was no great reader, cared little for art in any form and knew nothing of politics.

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All that occupied his mind were the petty affairs of his garden and his household. There was very little he could talk about, but he could talk about his servants rather interestingly. His mental horizon was narrow but within these limits he was a keen observer. He could talk well about his garden and his experiments with his flowers and he knew the composition and the quality of almost any dish he had eaten which had particularly pleased him. As these things were about all he talked about when I did visit him, I couldn't help remembering some one or other of his remarks. This is how I came to know that my uncle was perfectly satisfied with the Tills and with his housekeeper."

"With his housekeeper too?" inquired Muller.

Erlach was surprised at what appeared to be a particular interest on Muller's part in this woman. Like the gardener Till, the young officer had noticed Mrs. Tonner's look of anxiety and trouble. He had always respected her quiet reserve and faithfulness to duty, and like Till also, he did not wish, through anything he might say, to bring more worry and trouble to this woman. He cut in hastily now:

"Yes, my uncle was particularly pleased with Mrs. Tonner. She was quite alone in the world, which was a quality that uncle liked in a servant, and she was an excellent worker although she was very evidently a woman of refinement and intelligence above her station. She was the most economical housekeeper uncle had ever had and when he was sick she took the best of care of him. He told me several times that he had never been so comfortable. It does not seem to me in the least possible or necessary to connect this woman in any way with my uncle's disappearance — although I know that the local authorities have considered it a possibility."

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"One must not neglect any possibility in a case like this."

"Perhaps even the possibility that I might have something to do with it?" exclaimed the lieutenant in a tone of irritation.

"Even that possibility must be taken into consideration."

"Sir!"

"We are merely talking of all the possibilities which might be concerned in this still unexplained case," replied Muller quietly. "You have told me much of importance, Lieutenant. But even you have not been able to shed any light upon the most incomprehensible part of this mystery."

"You mean the locking of the doors on the inside?"

"Yes. And then when one considers the way the house is built —"

"What do you know about the way the house is built?" interrupted Erlach, in surprise which was increased by the detective's answer.

"I obtained a plan of the house a few days ago. For when four or five days had passed and nothing had been discovered in this case, the matter began to interest me."

The lieutenant gave an exclamation of astonishment, and the Police Commissioner smiled as he said to himself "that was a real Muller-trick."

The detective turned to him now. "You'll be interested to see the scene of the mystery, Dr. Lehr," he said. "I have the plan in my pocket here. Let's have a look at it."

The Commissioner laid down his cigar and bent over the paper. The young officer sat still in surprise at this man who had already taken up an investigation of the case, even before he was engaged for it.

"It's exceedingly interesting," said the Commis-

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sioner. "The walls are nine or ten feet high, both garden gates bolted on the inside, both the old gentleman's rooms locked on the inside and yet he has disappeared. Really, it is quite incomprehensible."

Muller pointed to a particular spot on the plan: "Right here, at that spot of the brick wall which lies opposite the gardener's house and the stable, somebody has climbed either in or out recently."

"How do you know that?" exclaimed Erlach.

"I have been examining that spot."

"You were there?"

The detective smiled at this unnecessary question: "It must have been a young man, or if not young, still very active."

"Who told you that?"

Muller smiled again, this time quite broadly. "I told it to myself," he answered calmly. "I'm no longer young but I'm still quite active and I climbed over the same place myself."

"You were in the garden too?"

"Yes, I was there for four hours. Quite time enough to get wet to my skin, for it was raining hard. But I was rather glad of the rain, because it gave me the assurance that there would be nobody else prowling around in the deserted estate. No one saw me go out either, for I did not leave until it was quite dark."

"Did you go into the house too?"

Muller shook his head. "No, I couldn't get into the house. The keys were at the county station,—and the locks were complicated ones." The detective halted with a laugh, and the Commissioner, laughing also, completed the sentence. "So you couldn't open the doors with your own instruments."

"Exactly. But I didn't even try to get into the house nor into any of the other buildings, which would

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have been easier. For it was really no affair of mine."

"But you did climb over the wall," said Erlach.

"Exactly. I thought I might take that much interest in the matter. And I didn't even do that until I was quite convinced that someone else had done the same thing a short time before."

"You are quite sure of that? And did you discover anything more?"

"No, nothing more, there was no one anywhere about the place."

A clock in the next room struck eleven. Muller rose. "Have you anything else to say to me, sir? I must be in my own home again by five o'clock."

"No," said Erlach, "only please leave me your address. I am supposing that you have already undertaken the case. And we really must talk about the payment —"

"Some other time," interrupted Muller. "Really and truly that is only a side issue. Or if you insist, it's easy enough settled. If it's not possible to discover your uncle's whereabouts or the fact of his death, then I'll look upon the whole thing as simply an interesting experiment. If you do come in possession of his fortune, you can pay me whatever you like. The Commissioner is witness to this agreement."

"But I can't accept any such arrangement," persisted Erlach.

"Oh, yes you can," said Dr. Lehr. "You see, you don't happen to know that our friend Muller has a perfect passion for interesting cases. Also that he is very well off."

"And also that I do not accept *this* interesting case under any other conditions," said Muller firmly.

Erlach struggled with himself for a moment, then took Muller's outstretched hand.

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"Very well then. But you must give me your address."

The detective shook his head. "No, you shan't have it."

"Why not?"

"Because you must not come to see me nor must you write me. No, I cannot explain it now."

"But I have your telephone number."

Muller gave a start. "Please do not make use of it. This is a very important matter, Lieutenant, please do as I ask. You may spoil an important line of investigation if you will not. You can send me news through the Commissioner, or meet me here or at any other place — any place *except* my house, at any time you wish. Also you can leave *your* address with me."

When he had taken the officer's card Muller turned to Dr. Lehr. "And now I have to thank you, sir, for helping me to get the official charge of this most interesting case."

The Commissioner smiled. "I suppose you'll never lose this passion for your work, will you?" he said.

"When will you begin your investigations?" asked Erlach.

"At once. I must make an examination of the Green House between now and four o'clock. For I have an important appointment in my own house at five and the journey will take about an hour." Muller's eyes shone and his cheeks were flushed. His whole frame seemed more tense in the excitement of his task. His enthusiasm was contagious.

"Then I must get you the keys at once," exclaimed Erlach.

"Yes, please, my carriage is waiting."

As the little brougham drove rapidly through the streets the two men inside sat in silence. Muller was

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no great talker, particularly not in the beginning of a case, and the young officer had not yet recovered from his bewilderment at finding the investigations, which he had thought to start, already in full swing. It lacked still some minutes of one o'clock when the carriage stopped at the Court House in Liesing, but it was nearly half an hour before Muller could come into possession of the keys. Then he drove the lieutenant to the railway station and returned to his carriage.

"Now, Heberlein," he said to his coachman, "drive me to the place where you waited for me three days ago." Again the carriage rolled along the highroads to Inzersdorf, past meadow land and ploughed fields, then again along a stretch of dreary waste land which was known as the Black Moor. They turned off at a little dip in the road, down a grass grown lane to a spot that was hidden from the main street by a heavy high willow thicket. Muller dismounted here and set out across the open land, above which floated a heavy mist. Several paths, some of them almost roads, led across this dreary stretch of country. Muller already knew the various directions of these roads, he knew also that two stately gardens, protected by their high walls, broke the monotony of this damp expanse of moorland. There were a few little streamlets flowing across it, hardly worthy the name and yet wide enough to need a bridge. Muller crossed one of these bridges now,—it was scarcely more than a plank,—and took the path to the left. About a hundred paces further he found himself in an avenue framed on either side by tall old beech trees. The avenue was not long and ended at a high green-painted iron gate in a brick wall. This was one of the entrances to the Erlach property.

During his walk over the moor Muller had been looking around him cautiously and was satisfied that

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there was no one within sight. Nothing broke the silence of the dreary spot as he stood listening at the gate. He opened it and went in, remaining inside for two hours. When he came out he knew little more than he did before, but he had made one discovery.

In the drawer of a cupboard in Mrs. Tonner's room, a drawer which was filled with old newspapers, he had found a man's silk muffler. It was a piece of cheap brightly-colored silk of the sort affected by young dandies of the lower class. He had found it thrust in hastily under the papers. This attracted his attention. For everything else in the room showed him that Mrs. Tonner was an extremely neat and tidy person.

She must have put the muffler in its place at a moment when she was in haste or greatly flustered about something. For otherwise she would not have been likely to keep the piece of silk in a drawer with newspapers. The last paper which had been put in the drawer bore the date of the 8th of September. The issue of September 9th lay in Erlach's room, and Erlach had disappeared on the night of September 9th. If nothing had happened in the house, Mrs. Tonner would probably have read the issue of the 9th on the 10th of September and would have placed it in the drawer. But on the morning of September 10th all was in confusion in the Green House. Mrs. Tonner's own room was in order, but the dining-room and Erlach's apartments were in the same condition that they had been from the moment of the discovery. Muller knew that Mrs. Tonner had not been alone in the house after the discovery until the time when she had left it in the afternoon. He knew also that she had returned to her own room only to pack her trunk and that this had been done in the presence of a constable. She had therefore not had

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time to take the muffler from the drawer in which she had thrust it. Nor had she had time to put the muffler in the drawer, for she had taken only a few most necessary things with her.

Now this muffler must have been put into the drawer on the morning of the 10th of September before the arrival of the police commissioner, and there must have been some reason for the woman's desire to hide it.

It had very likely been left in her room during the night of the 9th to the 10th of September. For Muller had discovered another proof that at some time during that night Mrs. Tonner had had a visitor in the kitchen. A tea service for two people, with remains of a light repast, was thrust in a heap on a corner of the kitchen table. The dishes used were the heavier kitchenware, quite different from the fine porcelain kept for Mr. Erlach. It was clear that Mrs. Tonner had had a visitor at some time in the evening after the hour when she had served her master's supper, for all the dishes used for this meal were clean and in their accustomed places.

Muller was almost certain that he knew who it was that had visited Mrs. Tonner on that critical evening. And yet as he walked back over the Black Moor he felt that he knew little more about the mystery than he did before. But Muller had learned to be patient.

He reached his own home a few minutes before five o'clock. It was a comfortable little old-fashioned house set in a garden, with hedge and wall protecting it from passers on the main street of the suburb.

"Has the new cook arrived?" asked Muller of the young man who opened the door for him. "And has Mrs. Grützner left?"

"Yes, sir," said the young man, taking Muller's hat.

"Send the woman up to me at once," said the

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detective, mounting the half flight to his sitting room. He stood at the window looking aimlessly out into the garden. The gleam in his eyes showed satisfaction with just a hint of curiosity. There was a knock on the door and as he answered it the old detective turned slowly round.

A tall gaunt woman stood on the threshold, a woman whose face might at one time have been beautiful. But the lines of it were faded and worn now and the great dark eyes were full of sorrow. Muller came a few steps to meet her.

"Welcome to my house, Mrs. Tonner," he said cordially. "I hope that we will get along well together. Two such quiet elderly people as we are, certainly ought to be able to make life easier for each other."

He held out his hand to her, and as she took it two great tears rolled down her cheeks.

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