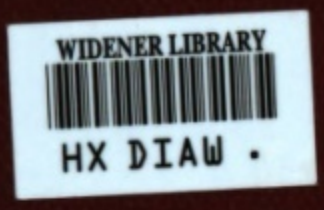
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THE GLOVED HAND

A DETECTIVE STORY

BY

BURTON E. STEVENSON

Author of "The Holladay Case," "The Marathon Mystery," "The Mystery of the Boule Cabinet," etc.

NEW YORK

DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY

1920

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CHAPTER I

THE FALLING STAR

I WAS genuinely tired when I got back to the office, that Wednesday afternoon, for it had been a trying day — the last of the series of trying days which had marked the progress of the Minturn case; and my feeling of depression was increased by the fact that our victory had not been nearly so complete as I had hoped it would be. Besides, there was the heat; always, during the past ten days, there had been the heat, unprecedented for June, with the thermometer climbing higher and higher and breaking a new record every day.

As I threw off coat and hat and dropped into the chair before my desk, I could see the heat-waves quivering up past the open windows from the fiery street below. I turned away and closed my eyes, and tried to evoke a vision of white surf falling upon the beach, of tall trees swaying in the breeze, of a brook dropping gently between green banks.

"Fountains that frisk and sprinkle
The moss they overspill;
Pools that the breezes crinkle," . . .

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and then I stopped, for the door had opened. I unclosed my eyes to see the office-boy gazing at me in astonishment. He was a well-trained boy, and recovered himself in an instant.

"Your mail, sir," he said, laid it at my elbow, and went out.

I turned to the letters with an interest the reverse of lively. The words of Henley's ballade were still running through my head —

> "Vale-lily and periwinkle;
> Wet stone-crop on the sill;
> The look of leaves a-twinkle
> With windlets," . . .

Again I stopped, for again the door opened, and again the office-boy appeared.

"Mr. Godfrey, sir," he said, and close upon the words, Jim Godfrey entered, looking as fresh and cool and invigorating as the fountains and brooks and pools I had been thinking of.

"How do you do it, Godfrey?" I asked, as he sat down.

"Do what?"

"Keep so fit."

"By getting a good sleep every night. Do you?"

I groaned as I thought of the inferno I called my bedroom.

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"I haven't really slept for a week," I said.

"Well, you're going to sleep to-night. That's the reason I'm here. I saw you in court this afternoon — one glance was enough."

"Yes," I assented; "one glance would be. But what's the proposition?"

"I'm staying at a little place I've leased for the summer up on the far edge of the Bronx. I'm going to take you up with me to-night and I'm going to keep you there till Monday. That will give you five nights' sleep and four days' rest. Don't you think you deserve it?"

"Yes," I agreed with conviction, "I do;" and I cast my mind rapidly over the affairs of the office. With the Minturn case ended, there was really no reason why I should not take a few days off.

"You'll come, then?" said Godfrey, who had been following my thoughts. "Don't be afraid," he added, seeing that I still hesitated. "You won't find it dull."

I looked at him, for he was smiling slightly and his eyes were very bright.

"Won't I?"

"No," he said, "for I've discovered certain phenomena in the neighbourhood which I think will interest you."

When Godfrey spoke in that tone, he could

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mean only one thing, and my last vestige of hesitation vanished.

"All right," I said; "I'll come."

"Good. I'll call for you at the Marathon about ten-thirty. That's the earliest I can get away," and in another moment he was gone.

So was my fatigue, and I turned with a zest to my letters and to the arrangements necessary for a three days' absence. Then I went up to my rooms, put a few things into a suit-case, got into fresh clothes, mounted to the Astor roof-garden for dinner, and a little after ten was back again at the Marathon. I had Higgins bring my luggage down, and sat down in the entrance-porch to wait for Godfrey.

Just across the street gleamed the lights of the police-station where he and I had had more than one adventure. For Godfrey was the principal police reporter of the *Record;* it was to him that journal owed those brilliant and glowing columns in which the latest mystery was described and dissected in a way which was a joy alike to the intellect and to the artistic instinct. For the editorial policy of the *Record,* for its attitude toward politics, Wall Street, the trusts, "society," I had only aversion and disgust; but whenever the town was shaken with a great criminal mystery, I never missed an issue.

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Godfrey and I had been thrown together first in the Holladay case, and that was the beginning of a friendship which had strengthened with the years. Then came his brilliant work in solving the Marathon mystery, in which I had also become involved. I had appealed to him for help in connection with that affair at Elizabeth; and he had cleared up the remarkable circumstances surrounding the death of my friend, Philip Vantine, in the affair of the Boule cabinet. So I had come to turn to him instinctively whenever I found myself confronting one of those intricate problems which every lawyer has sometimes to untangle.

Reciprocally, Godfrey sometimes sought my assistance; but, of course, it was only with a very few of his cases that I had any personal connection. The others I had to be content to follow, as the general public did, in the columns of the *Record*, certain that it would be the first to reach the goal. Godfrey had a peculiar advantage over the other police reporters in that he had himself, years before, been a member of the detective force, and had very carefully fostered and extended the friendships made at that time. He was looked on rather as an insider, and he was always scrupulously careful to give the members of the force every bit of credit they deserved — sometimes considerably more than they deserved.

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In consequence, he had the entrée at times when other reporters were rigorously barred.

It was nearly eleven o'clock before Godfrey arrived that evening, but I was neither surprised nor impatient. I knew how many and unexpected were the demands upon his time; and I always found a lively interest in watching the comings and goings at the station across the way—where, alas, the entrances far exceeded the exits! But finally, a car swung in from the Avenue at a speed that drew my eyes, and I saw that Godfrey was driving it.

"Jump in," he said, pushing out his clutch and pausing at the curb; and as I grabbed my suit-case and sprang to the seat beside him, he let the clutch in again and we were off. "No time to lose," he added, as he changed into high, and turned up Seventh Avenue.

At the park, he turned westward to the Circle, and then northward again out Amsterdam Avenue. There was little traffic, and we were soon skimming along at a speed which made me watch the cross-streets fearfully. In a few minutes we were across the Harlem and running northward along the uninteresting streets beyond. At this moment, it occurred to me that Godfrey was behaving singularly as though he were hastening to keep an appointment; but I judged it best not to dis-

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tract his attention from the street before us, and restrained the question which rose to my lips.

At last, the built-up portion of the town was left behind; we passed little houses in little yards, then meadows and gardens and strips of woodland, with a house only here and there. We were no longer on a paved street, but on a macadam road — a road apparently little used, for our lamps, sending long streamers of light ahead of us, disclosed far empty stretches, without vehicle of any kind. There was no moon, and the stars were half-obscured by a haze of cloud, while along the horizon to the west, I caught the occasional glow of distant lightning.

And then the sky was suddenly blotted out, and I saw that we were running along an avenue of lofty trees. The road at the left was bordered by a high stone wall, evidently the boundary of an important estate. We were soon past this, and I felt the speed of the car slacken.

"Hold tight!" said Godfrey, turned sharply through an open gateway, and brought the car to a stop. Then, snatching out his watch, he leaned forward and held it in the glare of the side-lamp. "Five minutes to twelve," he said. "We can just make it. Come on, Lester."

He sprang from the car, and I followed, realising that this was no time for questions.

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"This way," he said, and held out a hand to me, or I should have lost him in the darkness. We were in a grove of lofty trees, and at the foot of one of these, Godfrey paused. "Up with you," he added; "and don't lose any time," and he placed my hand upon the rung of a ladder.

Too amazed to open my lips, I obeyed. The ladder was a long one, and, as I went up and up, I could feel Godfrey mounting after me. I am not expert at climbing ladders, even by daylight, and my progress was not rapid enough to suit my companion, for he kept urging me on. But at last, with a breath of relief, I felt that I had reached the top.

"What now?" I asked.

"Do you see that big straight limb running out to your right?"

"Yes," I said, for my eyes were growing accustomed to the darkness.

"Sit down on it, and hold on to the ladder."

I did so somewhat gingerly, and in a minute Godfrey was beside me.

"Now," he said, in a voice low and tense with excitement, "look out, straight ahead. And remember to hold on to the ladder."

I could see the hazy mist of the open sky, and from the fitful light along the horizon, I knew that we were looking toward the west. Below me

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was a mass of confused shadows, which I took for clumps of shrubbery.

Then I felt Godfrey's hand close upon my arm.

"Look!" he said.

For an instant, I saw nothing; then my eyes caught what seemed to be a new star in the heavens; a star bright, sharp, steel blue ——

"Why, it's moving!" I cried.

He answered with a pressure of the fingers.

The star was indeed moving; not rising, not drifting with the breeze, but descending, descending slowly, slowly . . . I watched it with parted lips, leaning forward, my eyes straining at that falling light.

"Falling" is not the word; nor is "drifting." It did not fall and it did not drift. It deliberately descended, in a straight line, at a regular speed, calmly and evenly, as though animated by some definite purpose. Lower and lower it sank; then it seemed to pause, to hover in the air, and the next instant it burst into a shower of sparks and vanished.

And those sparks fell upon the shoulders of two white-robed figures, standing apparently in space, their arms rigidly extended, their faces raised toward the heavens.

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CHAPTER II

A STRANGE NEIGHBOUR

MECHANICALLY I followed Godfrey down the ladder, and, guided by the flaring lights, made my way back to the car. I climbed silently into my seat, while Godfrey started the motor. Then we rolled slowly up the driveway, and stopped before the door of a house standing deep among the trees.

"Wait for me here a minute," Godfrey said, and, when I had got out, handed me my suitcase, and then drove the car on past the house, no doubt to its garage.

He was soon back, opened the house-door, switched on the lights, and waved me in.

"Here we are," he said. "I'll show you your room," and he led the way up the stairs, opening a door in the hall at the top. "This is it," he added, and switched on the lights here also. "The bath-room is right at the end of the hall. Wash up, if you need to, and then come down, and we will have a good-night smoke."

It was a pleasant room, with the simplest of furniture. The night-breeze ruffled the curtains at

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the windows, and filled the room with the cool odour of the woods — how different it was from the odour of dirty asphalt! But I was in no mood to linger there — I wanted an explanation of that strange light and of those two white-robed figures. So I paused only to open my grip, change into a lounging-coat, and brush off the dust of the journey. Then I hastened downstairs.

Godfrey met me at the stair-foot, and led the way into what was evidently a lounging-room. A tray containing some cold meat, bread and butter, cheese, and a few other things, stood on a side-table, and to this Godfrey added two bottles of Bass.

"No doubt you're hungry after the ride," he said. "I know I am," and he opened the bottles. "Help yourself," and he proceeded to make himself a sandwich. "You see, I live the simple life out here. I've got an old couple to look after the place — Mr. and Mrs. Hargis. Mrs. Hargis is an excellent cook — but to ask her to stay awake till midnight would be fiendish cruelty. So she leaves me a lunch in the ice-box, and goes quietly off to bed. I'll give you some berries for breakfast such as you don't often get in New York — and the cream — wait till you try it! Have a cigar?"

"No," I said, sitting down very content with

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the world, "I've got my pipe," and I proceeded to fill up.

Godfrey took down his own pipe from the mantelshelf and sat down opposite me. A moment later, two puffs of smoke circled toward the ceiling.

"Now," I said, looking at him, "go ahead and tell me about it."

Godfrey watched a smoke-ring whirl and break before he answered.

"About ten days ago," he began, "just at midnight, I happened to glance out of my bed-room window, as I was turning in, and caught a glimpse of a queer light apparently sinking into the tree-tops. I thought nothing of it; but two nights later, at exactly the same time, I saw it again. I watched for it the next night, and again saw it — just for an instant, you understand, as it formed high in the air and started downward. The next night I was up a tree and saw more of it; but it was not until night before last that I found the place from which the whole spectacle could be seen. The trees are pretty thick all around here, and I doubt if there is any other place from which those two figures would be visible."

"Then there *were* two figures!" I said, for I had begun to think that my eyes had deceived me.

"There certainly were."

"Standing in space?"

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"Oh, no; standing on a very substantial roof."

"But what is it all about?" I questioned. "Why should that light descend every midnight? What *is* the light, anyway?"

"That's what I've brought you out here to find out. You've got four clear days ahead of you — and I'll be at your disposal from midnight on, if you happen to need me."

"But you must have some sort of idea about it," I persisted. "At least you know whose roof those figures were standing on."

"Yes, I know that. The roof belongs to a man named Worthington Vaughan. Ever hear of him?"

I shook my head.

"Neither had I," said Godfrey, "up to the time I took this place. Even yet, I don't know very much. He's the last of an old family, who made their money in real estate, and are supposed to have kept most of it. He's a widower with one daughter. His wife died about ten years ago, and since then he has been a sort of recluse, and has the reputation of being queer. He has been abroad a good deal, and it is only during the last year that he has lived continuously at this place next door, which is called Elmhurst. That's about all I've been able to find out. He certainly lives a retired life, for his place has

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a twelve-foot wall around it, and no visitors need apply."

"How do you know?"

"I tried to make a neighbourly call yesterday, and wasn't admitted. Mr. Vaughan was engaged. Getting ready for his regular midnight hocus-pocus, perhaps!"

I took a meditative puff or two.

"*Is* it hocus-pocus, Godfrey?" I asked, at last. "If it is, it's a mighty artistic piece of work."

"And if it isn't hocus-pocus, what is it?" Godfrey retorted. "A spiritual manifestation?"

I confess I had no answer ready. Ideas which seem reasonable enough when put dimly to oneself, become absurd sometimes when definitely clothed with words.

"There are just two possibilities," Godfrey went on. "Either it's hocus-pocus, or it isn't. If it is, it is done for some purpose. Two men don't go out on a roof every night at midnight and fire off a Roman candle and wave their arms around, just for the fun of the thing."

"It wasn't a Roman candle," I pointed out. "A Roman candle is visible when it's going up, and bursts and vanishes at the top of its flight. That light didn't behave that way at all. It formed high in the air, remained there stationary

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for a moment, gradually grew brighter, and then started to descend. It didn't fall, it came down slowly, and at an even rate of speed. And it didn't drift away before the breeze, as it would have done if it had been merely floating in the air. It descended in a straight line. It gave me the impression of moving as though a will actuated it — as though it had a distinct purpose. There was something uncanny about it!"

Godfrey nodded thoughtful agreement.

"I have felt that," he said, "and I admit that the behaviour of the light is extraordinary. But that doesn't prove it supernatural. I don't believe in the supernatural. Especially I don't believe that any two mortals could arrange with the heavenly powers to make a demonstration like that every night at midnight for their benefit. That's *too* absurd!"

"It is absurd," I assented, "and yet it isn't much more absurd than to suppose that two men would go out on the roof every night to watch a Roman candle, as you call it, come down. Unless, of course, they're lunatics."

"No," said Godfrey, "I don't believe they're lunatics — at least, not both of them. I have a sort of theory about it; but it's a pretty thin one, and I want you to do a little investigating on your

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own account before I tell you what it is. It's time we went to bed. Don't get up in the morning till you're ready to. Probably I'll not see you till night; I have some work to do that will take me off early. But Mrs. Hargis will make you comfortable, and I'll be back in time to join you in another look at the Roman candle!"

He uttered the last words jestingly, but I could see that the jest was a surface one, and that, at heart, he was deeply serious. Evidently, the strange star had impressed him even more than it had me — though perhaps in a different manner.

I found that it had impressed me deeply enough, for I dreamed about it that night — dreamed, and woke, only to fall asleep and dream and wake again. I do not remember that I saw any more in the dream than I had seen with my waking eyes, but each time I awoke trembling with apprehension and bathed in perspiration. As I lay there the second time, staring up into the darkness and telling myself I was a fool, there came a sudden rush of wind among the trees outside; then a vivid flash of lightning and an instant rending crash of thunder, and then a steady downpour of rain. I could guess how the gasping city welcomed it, and I lay for a long time listening to it, as it dripped from the leaves and beat against the

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house. A delightful coolness filled the room, an odour fresh and clean; and when, at last, with nerves quieted, I fell asleep again, it was not to awaken until the sun was bright against my curtains.

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CHAPTER III

THE DRAMA IN THE GARDEN

I GLANCED at my watch, as soon as I was out of bed, and saw that it was after ten o'clock. All the sleep I had lost during the hot nights of the previous week had been crowded into the last nine hours; I felt like a new man, and when, half an hour later, I ran downstairs, it was with such an appetite for breakfast as I had not known for a long time.

There was no one in the hall, and I stepped out through the open door to the porch beyond, and stood looking about me. The house was built in the midst of a grove of beautiful old trees, some distance back from the road, of which I could catch only a glimpse. It was a small house, a story and a half in height, evidently designed only as a summer residence.

"Good morning, sir," said a voice behind me, and I turned to find a pleasant-faced, grey-haired woman standing in the doorway.

"Good morning," I responded. "I suppose you are Mrs. Hargis?"

"Yes, sir; and your breakfast's ready."

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"Has Mr. Godfrey gone?"

"Yes, sir; he left about an hour ago. He was afraid his machine would waken you."

"It didn't," I said, as I followed her back along the hall. "Nothing short of an earthquake would have wakened me Ah, this is fine!"

She had shown me into a pleasant room, where a little table was set near an open window. It made quite a picture, with its white cloth and shining dishes and plate of yellow butter, and bowl of crimson berries, and — but I didn't linger to admire it. I don't know when I have enjoyed breakfast so much. Mrs. Hargis, after bringing in the eggs and bacon and setting a little pot of steaming coffee at my elbow, sensibly left me alone to the enjoyment of it. Ever since that morning, I have realised that, to start the day exactly right, a man should breakfast by himself, amid just such surroundings, leisurely and without distraction. A copy of the morning's *Record* was lying on the table, but I did not even open it. I did not care what had happened in the world the day before!

At last, ineffably content, I stepped out upon the driveway at the side of the house, and strolled away among the trees. At the end of a few minutes, I came to the high stone wall which

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bounded the estate of the mysterious Worthington Vaughan, and suddenly the wish came to me to see what lay behind it. Without much difficulty, I found the tree with the ladder against it, which we had mounted the night before. It was a long ladder, even in the daytime, but at last I reached the top, and settled myself on the limb against which it rested. Assuring myself that the leaves hid me from any chance observer, I looked down into the grounds beyond the wall.

There was not much to see. The grounds were extensive and had evidently been laid out with care, but there was an air of neglect about them, as though the attention they received was careless and inadequate. The shrubbery was too dense, grass was invading the walks, here and there a tree showed a dead limb or a broken one. Near the house was a wide lawn, designed, perhaps, as a tennis-court or croquet-ground, with rustic seats under the trees at the edge.

About the house itself was a screen of magnificent elms, which doubtless gave the place its name, and which shut the house in completely. All I could see of it was one corner of the roof. This, however, stood out clear against the sky, and it was here, evidently, that the mysterious midnight figures had been stationed. As I looked at it, I realised the truth of Godfrey's remark that prob-

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ably from no other point of vantage but just this would they be visible.

It did not take me many minutes to exhaust the interest of this empty prospect, more especially since my perch was anything but comfortable, and I was just about to descend, when two white-robed figures appeared at the edge of the open space near the house and walked slowly across it. I settled back into my place with a tightening of interest which made me forget its discomfort, for that these were the two star-worshippers I did not doubt.

The distance was so great that their faces were the merest blurs; but I could see that one leaned heavily upon the arm of the other, as much, or so it seemed to me, for moral as for physical support. I could see, too, that the hair of the feebler man was white, while that of his companion was jet black. The younger man's face appeared so dark that I suspected he wore a beard, and his figure was erect and vigorous, in the prime of life, virile and full of power.

He certainly dominated the older man. I watched them attentively, as they paced back and forth, and the dependence of the one upon the other was very manifest. Both heads were bent as though in earnest talk, and for perhaps half an hour they walked slowly up and down. Then,

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at a sign of fatigue from the older figure, the other led him to a garden-bench, where both sat down.

The elder man, I told myself, was no doubt Worthington Vaughan. Small wonder he was considered queer if he dressed habitually in a white robe and worshipped the stars at midnight! There was something monkish about the habits which he and his companion wore, and the thought flashed into my mind that perhaps they were members of some religious order, or some Oriental cult or priesthood. And both of them, I added to myself, must be a little mad!

As I watched, the discussion gradually grew more animated, and the younger man, springing to his feet, paced excitedly up and down, touching his forehead with his fingers from time to time, and raising his hands to heaven, as though calling it as a witness to his words. At last the other made a sign of assent, got to his feet, bent his head reverently as to a spiritual superior and walked slowly away toward the house. The younger man stood gazing after him until he passed from sight, then resumed his rapid pacing up and down, evidently deeply moved.

At last from the direction of the house came the flutter of a white robe. For a moment, I thought it was the old man returning; then as it

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emerged fully from among the trees, I saw that it was a woman — a young woman, I guessed, from her slimness, and from the mass of dark hair which framed her face. And then I remembered that Godfrey had told me that Worthington Vaughan had a daughter.

The man was at her side in an instant, held out his hand, and said something, which caused her to shrink away. She half-turned, as though to flee, but the other laid his hand upon her arm, speaking earnestly, and, after a moment, she permitted him to lead her to a seat. He remained standing before her, sometimes raising his hands to heaven, sometimes pointing toward the house, sometimes bending close above her, and from time to time making that peculiar gesture of touching his fingers to his forehead, whose meaning I could not guess. But I could guess at the torrent of passionate words which poured from his lips, and at the eager light which was in his eyes!

The woman sat quite still, with bowed head, listening, but making no sign either of consent or refusal. Gradually, the man grew more confident, and at last stooped to take her hand, but she drew it quickly away, and, raising her head, said something slowly and with emphasis. He shook his head savagely, then, after a rapid turn up and down, seemed to agree, bowed low to

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her, and went rapidly away toward the house. The woman sat for some time where he had left her, her face in her hands; then, with a gesture of weariness and discouragement, crossed the lawn and disappeared among the trees.

For a long time I sat there motionless, my eyes on the spot where she had disappeared, trying to understand. What was the meaning of the scene? What was it the younger man had urged so passionately upon her, but at which she had rebelled? What was it for which he had pled so earnestly? The obvious answer was that he pled for her love, that he had urged her to become his wife; but the answer did not satisfy me. His attitude had been passionate enough, but it had scarcely been lover-like. It had more of admonition, of warning, even of threat, than of entreaty in it. It was not the attitude of a lover to his mistress, but of a master to his pupil.

And what had been the answer, wrung from her finally by his insistence — the answer to which he had at first violently dissented, and then reluctantly agreed?

No doubt, if these people had been garbed in the clothes of every day, I should have felt at the outset that all this was none of my business, and have crept down the ladder and gone away. But their strange dress gave to the scene an air at

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once unreal and theatrical, and not for an instant had I felt myself an intruder. It was as though I were looking at the rehearsal of a drama designed for the public gaze and enacted upon a stage; or, more properly, a pantomime, dim and figurative, but most impressive. Might it not, indeed, be a rehearsal of some sort — private theatricals — make-believe? But that scene at midnight — that could not be make-believe! No, nor was this scene in the garden. It was in earnest — in deadliest earnest; there was about it something sinister and threatening; and it was the realisation of this — the realisation that there was something here not right, something demanding scrutiny — which kept me chained to my uncomfortable perch, minute after minute.

But nothing further happened, and I realised, at last, that if I was to escape an agonising cramp in the leg, I must get down. I put my feet on the ladder, and then paused for a last look about the grounds. My eye was caught by a flutter of white among the trees. Someone was walking along one of the paths; in a moment, straining forward, I saw it was the woman, and that she was approaching the wall.

And then, as she came nearer, I saw that she was not a woman at all, but a girl — a girl of eighteen or twenty, to whom the flowing robes

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gave, at a distance, the effect of age. I caught only a glimpse of her face before it was hidden by a clump of shrubbery, but that glimpse told me that it was a face to set the pulses leaping. I strained still farther forward, waiting until she should come into sight again. . . .

Along the path she came, with the sunlight about her, kissing her hair, her lips, her cheeks — and the next instant her eyes were staring upwards into mine.

I could not move. I could only stare down at her. I saw the hot colour sweep across her face; I saw her hand go to her bosom; I saw her turn to flee. Then, to my amazement, she stopped, as though arrested by a sudden thought, turned toward me again, and raised her eyes deliberately to mine.

For fully a minute she stood there, her gaze searching and intent, as though she would read my soul; then her face hardened with sudden resolution. Again she put her hand to her bosom, turned hastily toward the wall, and disappeared behind it.

The next instant, something white came flying over it, and fell on the grass beneath my tree. Staring down at it, I saw it was a letter.

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CHAPTER IV

ENTER FREDDIE SWAIN

I FELL, rather than climbed, down the ladder, snatched the white missile from the grass, and saw that it was, indeed, a sealed and addressed envelope. I had somehow expected that address to include either Godfrey's name or mine; but it did neither. The envelope bore these words:

MR. FREDERIC SWAIN,
1010 Fifth Avenue,
New York City.

If not at this address,
please try the Calumet Club.

I sat down on the lowest rung of the ladder, whistling softly to myself. For Freddie Swain's address was no longer 1010 Fifth Avenue, nor was he to be found in the luxurious rooms of the Calumet Club. In fact, it was enarly a year since he had entered either place. For some eight hours of every week-day, he laboured in the law offices of Royce & Lester; he slept in a little room on the top floor of the Marathon; three hours of every evening, Saturdays, Sundays and holidays

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excepted, were spent at the law school of the University of New York; and the remaining hours of the twenty-four in haunts much less conspicuous and expensive than the Calumet Club.

For Freddie Swain had taken one of these tobogan slides down the hill of fortune which sometimes happen to the most deserving. His father, old General Orlando Swain, had, all his life, put up a pompous front and was supposed to have inherited a fortune from somewhere; but, when he died, this edifice was found to be all façade and no foundation, and Freddie inherited nothing but debts. He had been expensively educated for a career as an Ornament of Society, but he found that career cut short, for Society suddenly ceased to find him ornamental. I suppose there were too many marriageable daughters about!

I am bound to say that he took the blow well. Instead of attempting to cling to the skirts of Society as a vendor of champagne or an organiser of fêtes champêtres, he — to use his own words — decided to cut the whole show.

Our firm had been named as the administrators of the Swain estate, and when the storm was over and we were sitting among the ruins, Freddie expressed the intention of going to work.

"What will you do?" Mr. Royce inquired. "Ever had any training in making money?"

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"No, only in spending it," retorted Freddie, easily. "But I can learn. I was thinking of studying law. That's a good trade, isn't it?"

"Splendid!" assented Mr. Royce, warmly. "And there are always so many openings. You see, nobody studies law — lawyers are as scarce as hen's teeth."

"Just the same, I think I'll have a try at it," said Freddie, sturdily. "There's always room at the top, you know," he added, with a grin. "I can go to the night-school at the University, and I ought to be able to earn enough to live on, as a clerk or something. I know how to read and write."

"That will help, of course," agreed Mr. Royce. "But I'm afraid that, right at first, anyway, you can scarcely hope to live in the style to which you have been accustomed."

Freddie turned on him with fire in his eyes.

"Look here," he said, "suppose you give me a job. I'll do my work and earn my wages — try me and see."

There was something in his face that touched me, and I glanced at Mr. Royce. I saw that his gruffness was merely a mantle to cloak his real feelings; and the result was that Freddie Swain was set to work as a copying-clerk at a salary of fifteen dollars a week. He applied himself to

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his work with an energy that surprised me, and I learned that he was taking the night-course at the University, as he had planned. Finally, one night, I met him as I was turning in to my rooms at the Marathon, and found that he had rented a cubby-hole on the top floor of the building. After that, I saw him occasionally, and when six months had passed, was forced to acknowledge that he was thoroughly in earnest. I happened to remark to Mr. Royce one day that Swain seemed to be making good.

"Yes," my partner agreed; "I didn't think he had it in him. He had a rude awakening from his dream of affluence, and it seems to have done him good."

But, somehow, I had fancied that it was from more than a dream of affluence he had been awakened; and now, as I sat staring at this letter, I began to understand dimly what the other dream had been.

The first thing was to get the letter into his hands, for I was certain that it was a cry for help. I glanced at my watch and saw that it was nearly half past twelve. Swain, I knew, would be at lunch, and was not due at the office until one o'clock. Slipping the letter into my pocket, I turned back to the house, and found Mrs. Hargis standing on the front porch.

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"I declare, I thought you was lost, Mr. Lester," she said. "I was just going to send William to look for you. Ain't you 'most starved?"

"Scarcely starved, Mrs. Hargis," I said, "but with a very creditable appetite, when you consider that I ate breakfast only two hours ago."

"Well, come right in," she said. "Your lunch is ready."

"I suppose there's a telephone somewhere about?" I asked, as I followed her through the hall.

"Yes, sir, in here," and she opened the door into a little room fitted up as a study. "It's here Mr. Godfrey works sometimes."

"Thank you," I said, "I've got to call up the office. I won't be but a minute."

I found Godfrey's number stamped on the cover of the telephone book, and then called the office. As I had guessed, Swain was not yet back from lunch, and I left word for him to call me as soon as he came in. Then I made my way to the dining-room, where Mrs. Hargis was awaiting me.

"How does one get out here from New York, Mrs. Hargis?" I asked, as I sat down. "That is, if one doesn't happen to own a motor car?"

"Why, very easily, sir. Take the Third Ave-

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nue elevated to the end of the line, and then the trolley. It runs along Dryden Road, just two blocks over."

"Where does one get off?"

"At Prospect Street, sir."

"And what is this place called?"

"This is the old Bennett place, sir."

"Thank you. And let me tell you, Mrs. Hargis," I added, "that I have never tasted a better salad."

Her kindly old face flushed with pleasure.

"It's nice of you to say that, sir," she said. "We have our own garden, and William takes a great pride in it."

"I must go and see it," I said. "I've always fancied I'd like to potter around in a garden. I must see if Mr. Godfrey won't let me in on this."

"He spends an hour in it every morning. Sometimes he can hardly tear hisself away. I certainly do like Mr. Godfrey."

"So do I," I agreed heartily. "He's a splendid fellow — one of the nicest, squarest men I ever met — and a friend worth having."

"He's all of that, sir," she agreed, and stood for a moment, clasping and unclasping her hands nervously, as though there was something else she wished to say. But she evidently thought better of it. "There's the bell, sir," she added.

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"Please ring if there's anything else you want," and she left me to myself.

I had pushed back my chair and was filling my pipe when the telephone rang. It was Swain.

"Swain," I said, "this is Mr. Lester. I'm at a place up here in the Bronx, and I want you to come up right away."

"Very good, sir," said Swain. "How do I get there?"

"Take the Third Avenue elevated to the end of the line, and then the trolley which runs along Dryden Road. Get off at Prospect Street, walk two blocks west and ask for the old Bennett place. I'll have an eye out for you."

"All right, sir," said Swain, again. "Do you want me to bring some papers, or anything?"

"No; just come as quickly as you can," I answered, and hung up.

I figured that, even at the best, it would take Swain an hour and a half to make the journey, and I strolled out under the trees again. Then the thought came to me that I might as well make a little exploration of the neighbourhood, and I sauntered out to the road. Along it for some distance ran the high wall which bounded Elmhurst, and I saw that the wall had been further fortified by ugly pieces of broken glass set in cement along its top.

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I could see a break in the wall, about midway of its length, and, walking past, discovered that this was where the gates were set — heavy gates of wrought iron, very tall, and surmounted by sharp spikes. The whole length of the wall was, I judged, considerably over a city block, but there was no other opening in it.

At the farther end, it was bounded by a cross-road, and, turning along this, I found that the wall extended nearly the same distance in this direction. There was an opening about midway — a small opening, closed by a heavy, iron-banded door — the servants' entrance, I told myself. The grounds of a row of houses facing the road beyond ran up to the wall at the back, and I could not follow it without attracting notice, but I could see that there was no break in it. I was almost certain that the wall which closed the estate on Godfrey's side was also unbroken. There were, then, only the two entrances.

I walked back again to the front, and paused for a glance through the gates. But there was nothing to be seen. The driveway parted and curved away out of sight in either direction, and a dense mass of shrubbery opposite the gate shut off any view of the grounds. Even of the house, there was nothing to be seen except the chimneys and one gable. Evidently, Mr. Vaughan was

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fond of privacy, and had spared no pains to secure it.

Opposite the Vaughan place, a strip of woodland ran back from the road. It was dense with undergrowth, and, I reflected, would form an admirable hiding-place. The road itself seemed little travelled, and I judged that the main artery of traffic was the road along which the trolley ran, two blocks away.

I returned to my starting point, and assured myself that the wall on that side was indeed without a break. Some vines had started up it here and there, but, for the most part, it loomed grey and bleak, crowned along its whole length by that threatening line of broken glass. I judged it to be twelve feet high, so that, even without the glass, it would be impossible for anyone to get over it without assistance. As I stood there looking at it, resenting the threat of that broken glass, and pondering the infirmity of character which such a threat revealed, it suddenly struck me that the upper part of the wall differed slightly from the lower part. It was a little lighter in colour, a little newer in appearance; and, examining the wall more closely, I discovered that originally it had been only eight or nine feet high, and that the upper part had been added at a later date — and last of all, of course, the broken glass!

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As I turned back, at last, toward the house, I saw someone coming up the drive. In a moment, I recognised Swain, and quickened my steps.

"You made good time," I said.

"Yes, sir; I was fortunate in catching an express and not having to wait for the trolley."

"We'd better go into the house," I added. "I have a message for you — a confidential message."

He glanced at me quickly, but followed silently, as I led the way into Godfrey's study and carefully closed the door.

"Sit down," I said, and I sat down myself and looked at him.

I had always thought Swain a handsome, thoroughbred-looking fellow; and I saw that, in the past few months, he had grown more thoroughbred-looking than ever. His face was thinner than when he had first gone to work for us, there was a new line between his eyebrows, and the set of his lips told of battles fought and won. A year ago, it had seemed natural to call him Freddie, but no one would think of doing so now. His father's creditors had not attempted to take from him his wardrobe — a costly and extensive one — so that he was dressed as carefully, if not quite as fashionably, as ever, in a way that suggested a young millionaire, rather than a fifteen-dollar-a-

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week clerk. At this moment, his face was clouded, and he drummed the arm of his chair with nervous fingers. Then he shifted uneasily under my gaze, which was, perhaps, more earnest than I realised.

"You said you had a message for me, sir," he reminded me.

"Yes," I said. "Have you ever been out this way before?"

"Yes, I have been out this way a number of times."

"You know this place, then?"

"I have heard it mentioned, but I have never been here before."

"Do you know whose place that is next door to us?"

"Yes," and his voice sank to a lower key. "It belongs to Worthington Vaughan."

"And you know him?"

"At one time, I knew him quite well, sir," and his voice was still lower.

"No doubt," I went on, more and more interested, "you also knew his very fascinating daughter."

A wave of colour crimsoned his face.

"Why are you asking me these questions, Mr. Lester?" he demanded.

"Because," I said, "the message I have is

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from that young lady, and is for a man named Frederic Swain."

He was on his feet, staring at me, and all the blood was gone from his cheeks.

"A message!" he cried. "From her! From Marjorie! What is it, Mr. Lester? For God's sake . . ."

"Here it is," I said, and handed him the letter.

He seized it, took one look at the address, then turned away to the window and ripped the envelope open. He unfolded the sheet of paper it contained, and as his eyes ran along it, his face grew whiter still. At last he raised his eyes and stared at me with the look of a man who felt the world tottering about him.

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CHAPTER V

A CALL FOR HELP

"FOR heaven's sake, Swain," I said, "sit down and pull yourself together."

But he did not seem to hear me. Instead he read the letter through again, then he turned toward me.

"How did you get this, Mr. Lester?" he asked.

"I found it lying under the trees. It had been thrown over the wall."

"But how did you know it was thrown over by Miss Vaughan?"

"That was an easy guess," I said, sparring feebly. "Who else would attempt to conduct a surreptitious correspondence with a handsome young man?"

But he did not smile; the look of intensity in his eyes deepened.

"Come, Mr. Lester," he protested, "don't play with me. I have a right to know the truth."

"What right?" I queried.

He paused an instant, as though nerving himself to speak, as though asking himself how much

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he should tell me. Then he came toward me impulsively.

"Miss Vaughan and I are engaged to be married," he said. "Some persons may tell you that the engagement has been broken off; more than once, I have offered to release her, but she refuses to be released. We love each other."

The word "love" is a difficult one for us Anglo-Saxons to pronounce; the voice in which Swain uttered it brought me to my feet, with outstretched hand.

"If there's anything I can do for you, my boy," I said, "tell me."

"Thank you, Mr. Lester," and he returned my clasp. "You have done a great deal already in giving me this letter so promptly. The only other thing you can do is to permit me to stay here until to-night."

"Until to-night?"

"Miss Vaughan asks me to meet her to-night."

"In her father's grounds?"

"Yes."

"Unknown to him?"

"Yes."

"He is not friendly to you?"

"No."

I had a little struggle with myself.

"See here, Swain," I said, "sit down and let

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us talk this thing over calmly. Before I promise anything, I should like to know more of the story. From the glimpse I caught of Miss Vaughan, I could see that she is very beautiful, and she also seemed to me to be very young."

"She is nineteen," said Swain.

"Her father is wealthy, I suppose?"

"Very wealthy."

"And her mother is dead?"

"Yes."

"Well," I began, and hesitated, fearing to wound him.

"I know what you are thinking," Swain burst in, "and I do not blame you. You are thinking that she is a young, beautiful and wealthy girl, while I am a poverty-stricken nonentity, without any profession, and able to earn just enough to live on — perhaps I couldn't do even that, if I had to buy my clothes! You are thinking that her father is right to separate us, and that she ought to be protected from me. Isn't that it?"

"Yes," I admitted, "something like that."

"And I answer, Mr. Lester, by saying that all that is true, that I am not worthy of her, and that nobody knows it better than I do. There are thousands of men who could offer her far more than I can, and who would be eager to offer it. But when I asked her to marry me, I thought my-

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self the son of a wealthy man. When I found myself a pauper, I wrote at once to release her. She replied that when she wished her release, she would ask for it; that it wasn't my money she was in love with. Then I came out here and had a talk with her father. He was kind enough, but pointed out that the affair could not go further until I had established myself. I agreed, of course; I agreed, too, when he suggested that it would only be fair to her to leave her free — not to see her or write to her, or try to influence her in any way. I wanted to be fair to her. Since then, I have not seen her, nor heard from her. But her father's feelings have changed toward me."

"In what way?"

"I thought he might be interested to know what I was doing, and two or three months ago, I called and asked to see him. Instead of seeing me, he sent word by a black-faced fellow in a white robe that neither he nor his daughter wished to see me again."

His face was red with the remembered humiliation.

"I wrote to Miss Vaughan once, after that," he added, "but my letter was not answered."

"Evidently she didn't get your letter."

"Why do you think so?"

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"If she had got it, she would have known that you were no longer at 1010 Fifth Avenue. Her father, no doubt, kept it from her."

He flushed still more deeply, and started to say something, but I held him silent.

"He was justified in keeping it," I said. "You had promised not to write to her. And I don't see that you have given me any reason why I should assist you against him."

"I haven't," Swain admitted more calmly, "and under ordinary circumstances, my self-respect would compel me to keep away. I am not a fortune-hunter. But I can't keep away; I can't stand on my dignity. When she calls for aid, I *must* go to her, not for my own sake but for hers, because she needs to be protected from her father far more than from me."

"What do you mean by that?" I demanded.

"Mr. Lester," he said, leaning forward in his chair and speaking in a lowered voice and with great earnestness, "her father is mad — I am sure of it. No one but a madman would live and dress as he does; no one but a madman would devote his whole time to the study of the supernatural; no one but a madman would believe in the supernatural as he does."

But I shook my head.

"I'm afraid that won't do, Swain. A good

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many fairly sane people believe in the supernatural and devote themselves to its study — there is William James, for instance."

"But William James doesn't dress in flowing robes, and worship the sun, and live with a Hindu mystic."

"No," I smiled, "he doesn't do that," and I thought again of the mysterious light and of the two white-clad figures. "Does he live with a Hindu mystic?"

"Yes," said Swain, bitterly. "An adept, or whatever they call it. He's the fellow who kicked me out."

"Does he speak English?"

"Better than I do. He seems a finely-educated man."

"Is he a lunatic, too?"

Swain hesitated.

"I don't know," he said, finally. "I only saw him once, and I was certainly impressed — I wasn't one, two, three with him. I suppose mysticism comes more or less natural to a Hindu; but I'm convinced that Mr. Vaughan has softening of the brain."

"How old is he?"

"About sixty."

"Has he always been queer?"

"He has always been interested in telepathy and

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mental suggestion, and all that sort of thing. But before his wife's death, he was fairly normal. It was her death that started him on this supernatural business. He hasn't thought of anything else since."

"Are there any relatives who could be asked to interfere?"

"None that I know of."

I thought over what he had told me.

"Well," I said at last, "I can see no harm in your meeting Miss Vaughan and finding out what the condition of affairs really is. If her father is really mad, he may be a good deal worse now than he was when you saw him last. It would, of course, be possible to have his sanity tested — but his daughter would scarcely wish to do that."

"No, of course not," Swain agreed.

"Her letter tells you nothing?"

"Nothing except that she is in great trouble, and wishes to see me at once."

"You are to go to the house?"

"No; there is an arbour in one corner of the grounds. She says that she will be there at eleven-thirty every night for three nights. After that, she says it will be no use for me to come — that it will be too late."

"What does she mean by 'too late'?"

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"I have no idea," he answered, and turned to another anxious perusal of the letter.

I turned the situation over in my mind. Evidently Miss Vaughan believed that she had grave cause for alarm, and yet it was quite possible she might be mistaken. She was being urged to consent to something against her will, but perhaps it was for her own good. In any event, I had seen no indication that her consent was being sought by violence. There must be no interference on our part until we were surer of our ground.

"Well, Swain," I said, at last, "I will help you on one condition."

"What is that?"

"You will meet Miss Vaughan to-night and hear her story, but you will take no action until you and I have talked the matter over. She, herself, says that she has three days," I went on, as he started to protest, "so there is no necessity for leaping in the dark. And I would point out to you that she is not yet of age, but is still under her father's control."

"She is nineteen," he protested.

"In this state, the legal age for women, as for men, is twenty-one. The law requires a very serious reason for interfering between a child and its father. Moreover," I added, "she must not be compromised. If you persuade her to accompany

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you to-night, where would you take her? In no case, will I be a party to an elopement — I will do all I can to prevent it."

He took a short turn up and down the room, his hands clenched behind him.

"Mr. Lester," he said, at last, stopping before me, "I want you to believe that I have not even thought of an elopement — that would be too base, too unfair to her. But I see that you are right. She must not be compromised."

"And you promise to ask my advice?"

"Suppose I make such a promise, what then?"

"If you make such a promise, and I agree with you as to the necessity for Miss Vaughan to leave her father, I think I can arrange for her to stay with Mr. and Mrs. Royce for a time. There she will be safe. Should legal proceedings become necessary, our firm will help you. I want to help you, Swain," I added, warmly, "but I must be convinced that you deserve help. That's reasonable, isn't it?"

"Yes," he agreed, and held out his hand. "And I promise."

"Good. And now for the arrangements."

Two twelve-foot ladders were necessary, one for either side of the wall; but, beyond a short step-ladder, the place possessed none except the long one by which Godfrey and I had mounted

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into the tree. Swain suggested that this might do for one, but I felt that it would better stay where it was, and sent Hargis over to Yonkers to buy two new ones, instructing him to bring them back with him.

Then Swain and I reconnoitred the wall, and chose for the crossing a spot where the glass escarpment seemed a little less formidable than elsewhere.

"You can step from one ladder to the other," I pointed out, "without touching the top of the wall. A mere touch would be dangerous in the dark."

He nodded his agreement, and finally we went back to the house. Getting there, we found suddenly that we had nothing more to say. Swain was soon deep in his own thoughts; and, I must confess, that, after the first excitement, I began to find the affair a little wearying. Another man's love-affair is usually wearying; and, besides that, the glimpse which I had caught of Marjorie Vaughan made me think that she was worthy of a bigger fish than Swain would ever be. He was right in saying that there were thousands of men who had more to give her, and who would be eager to give.

I examined Swain, as he sat there staring at

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nothing, with eyes not wholly friendly. He was handsome enough, but in a stereotyped way. And he was only an insignificant clerk, with small prospect of ever being anything much better, for he had started the battle of life too late. Honest, of course, honourable, clean-hearted, but commonplace, with a depth of soul easily fathomed. I know now that I was unjust to Swain, but, at the moment, my scrutiny of him left me strangely depressed.

A rattle of wheels on the drive brought us both out of our thoughts. It was Hargis returning with the ladders. I had him hang them up against the shed where he kept his gardening implements, for I did not wish him to suspect the invasion we had planned; then, just to kill time and get away from Swain, I spent an hour with Hargis in his garden; and finally came the summons to dinner. An hour later, as we sat on the front porch smoking, and still finding little or nothing to say, Mrs. Hargis came out to bid us good-night.

"Mr. Swain can use the bedroom next to yours, Mr. Lester," she said.

"Perhaps he won't stay all night," I said. "If he does, I'll show him the way to it. And thank you very much, Mrs. Hargis."

"Is there anything else I can do, sir?"

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"No, thank you."

"Mr. Godfrey will be here a little before midnight — at least, that's his usual time."

"We'll wait up for him," I said. "Good night, Mrs. Hargis."

"Good night, sir," and she went back into the house.

I have never passed through a longer or more trying hour than the next one was, and I could tell by the way Swain twitched about in his chair that he felt the tedium as much as I. Once or twice I tried to start a conversation, but it soon trickled dry; and we ended by smoking away moodily and staring out into the darkness.

At last Swain sprang to his feet.

"I can't stand this any longer," he said. "I'm going over the wall."

I struck a match and looked at my watch.

"It isn't eleven o'clock yet," I warned him.

"I don't care. Perhaps she'll be ahead of time. Anyway, I might as well wait there as here."

"Come on, then," I agreed, for I felt myself that another such hour would be unendurable.

Together we made our way back to the shed and took down the ladders. A moment later, we were at the wall. Swain placed his ladder against it, and mounted quickly to the top. As he paused there, I handed him up the other one. He caught

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it from my hands, lifted it over the wall, and lowered it carefully on the other side. As he did so, I heard him give a muffled exclamation of mingled pain and annoyance, and knew that he had cut himself.

"Not bad, is it?" I asked.

"No; only a scratch on the wrist," he answered shortly, and the next instant he had swung himself over the wall and disappeared.

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CHAPTER VI

THE SCREAM IN THE NIGHT

FOR some moments, I stood staring up into the darkness, half-expecting that shadowy figure to reappear, descend the ladder, and rejoin me. Then I shook myself together. The fact that our plot was really moving, that Swain was in the enemy's country, so to speak, gave the affair a finality which it had lacked before. It was too late now to hesitate or turn back; we must press forward. I felt as though, after a long period of uncertainty, war had been declared and the advance definitely begun. So it was with a certain sense of relief that I turned away, walked slowly back to the house, and sat down again upon the porch to wait.

Now waiting is seldom a pleasant or an easy thing, and I found it that night most unpleasant and uneasy. For, before long, doubts began to crowd upon me — doubts of the wisdom of the course I had subscribed to. It would have been wiser, I told myself, if it had been I, and not Swain, who had gone to the rendezvous; wiser still, perhaps, to have sought an interview openly,

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and to have made sure of the facts before seeming to encourage what might easily prove to be a girl's more or less romantic illusions. A midnight interview savoured too much of melodrama to appeal to a middle-aged lawyer like myself, however great its appeal might be to youthful lovers. At any rate, I would be certain that the need was very great before I consented to meddle further!

Somewhat comforted by this resolution and by the thought that no real harm had as yet been done, I struck a match and looked at my watch. It was half-past eleven. Well, whatever the story was, Swain was hearing it now, and I should hear it before long. And then I caught the hum of an approaching car, and was momentarily blinded by the glare of acetylene lamps.

"Hello, Lester," called Godfrey's voice, "I'll be back in a minute," and he ran the car on toward the rear of the house.

I stood up with a gasp of thankfulness. Here was someone to confide in and advise with. The stretch of lonely waiting was at an end; it had been a trying evening!

I think the warmth of my greeting surprised Godfrey, for he looked at me curiously.

"Sit down, Godfrey," I said. "I've got something to tell you."

"What, discoveries already?" he laughed, but

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he drew a chair close to mine and sat down. "Well, what are they?"

I began at the beginning and related the day's adventures. He listened without comment, but I could see how his interest grew.

"So young Swain is over in those grounds now," he said thoughtfully, when I had finished.

"Yes; he's been there three-quarters of an hour."

"Why do you suppose Miss Vaughan named so late an hour?"

"I don't know. Perhaps because she was afraid of being discovered earlier than that — or perhaps merely because she's just a romantic girl."

Godfrey sat with his head bent in thought for a moment.

"I have it!" hes aid. "At eleven-thirty every night her father and the adept go up to the roof, to remain there till midnight. That is the one time of the whole day when she is absolutely sure to be alone. Come along, Lester!"

He was on his feet now, and his voice was quivering with excitement.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Up the ladder. It's nearly twelve. If the star falls as usual, we'll know that everything is all right. If it doesn't . . ."

He did not finish, but hurried away among the

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trees. In a moment we were at the ladder; in another moment we were high among the leaves, straining our eyes through the darkness.

"I'm going to look at my watch," said Godfrey, in a low voice. "Lean back and screen me."

I heard the flash of the match and saw a little glare of light against the nearest leaves. Then Godfrey's voice spoke again.

"It's three minutes of twelve," he said.

There was a tension in his voice which sent a shiver through me, though I understood but dimly what it was he feared. The stars were shining brightly, and once I fancied that I saw the strange star appear among them; but when I closed my eyes for an instant and looked again, it was gone. Slow minute followed minute, and the hand with which I clutched the ladder began to tremble. The sight of that mysterious light had shaken me the night before, but not half so deeply as its absence shook me now. At last the suspense grew unendurable.

"It must be long past midnight," I whispered.

"It is," agreed Godfrey gravely; "we may as well go down."

He paused an instant longer to stare out into the darkness, then descended quickly. I followed, and found him waiting, a dark shadow. He put

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his hand on my arm, and stood a moment, as though in indecision. For myself, I felt as though an intolerable burden had been laid upon my shoulders.

"Well," I asked, at last, "what now?"

"We must see if Swain has returned," he answered. "If he has, all right. If he hasn't, we'll have to go and look for him."

"What is it you fear, Godfrey?" I demanded. "Do you think Swain's in danger?"

"I don't know what I fear; but there's something wrong over there. This is the first night for a week that that light hasn't appeared."

"Still," I pointed out, "that may have nothing to do with Swain."

"No; but it's a coincidence that he should be in the grounds — and I'm always afraid of coincidences. Let us see if he is back," and he turned toward the house.

But I held his arm.

"If he's back," I said, "he'll have taken the ladders down from the wall."

"That's true," and together we made our way forward among the trees. Then we reached the wall, and there was the dim white line of the ladder leaning against it. Without a word, Godfrey mounted it, stood an instant at the top, and then came down again.

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"The other ladder is still there," he said, and took off his cap and rubbed his head perplexedly. I could not see his face, but I could guess how tense it was. I had been with him in many trying situations, but only once before had I seen him use that gesture!

"It won't do to alarm the house," he said, at last. "Do you know where he was to meet Miss Vaughan?"

"At an arbour in one corner of the grounds," I answered.

"Then we'll start from there and take a quiet look for him. Wait here for me a minute."

He melted into the darkness, and I stood holding on to the ladder as though in danger of falling, and staring at the top of the wall, where I had last seen Swain. An hour and a half had passed since then. . . .

A touch on the arm brought me around with a start.

"Here, put this pistol in your pocket," said Godfrey's voice, and I felt the weapon pressed into my hand. "And here's an electric torch. Do you feel the button?"

"Yes," I said, and pressed it. A ray of light shot toward the wall, but I released the button instantly.

"You'd better keep it in your hand," he added,

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"ready for action. No telling what we'll run across. And now come ahead."

He put his foot on the ladder, but I stopped him.

"Look here, Godfrey," I said, "do you realise that what we're about to do is pretty serious? Swain might have a legal excuse, since the daughter of the house invited him to a meeting; but if we go over the wall, we're trespassers pure and simple. Anybody who runs across us in the darkness has the right to shoot us down without asking any questions — and we'd have no legal right to shoot back!"

I could hear Godfrey chuckling, and I felt my cheeks redden.

"You remind me of Tartarin," he said; "the adventurer-Tartarin urging you on, the lawyer-Tartarin holding you back. My advice is to shake the lawyer, Lester. He's out of his element here to-night. But if he's too strong for you, why, stay here," and he started up the ladder.

Burning with vexation, I started after him, but suddenly he stopped.

"Listen!" he whispered.

I heard something rattle against the other side of the wall; then a dark figure appeared on the coping.

I felt Godfrey press me back, and descended

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cautiously. A moment later, something slid down the wall, and I knew that the person at the top had lifted the other ladder over. Then the figure descended, and then a distorted face stared into the circle of Godfrey's torch.

For a breath, I did not recognise it; then I saw that it was Swain's.

I shall never forget the shock it gave me, with its starting eyes and working mouth and smear of blood across the forehead. Godfrey, I knew, was also startled, for the light flashed out for an instant, and then flashed on again.

"What is it, Swain?" I cried, and seized him by the arm; but he shook me off roughly.

"Stand back!" he cried, hoarsely. "Who is it? What do you want?"

"It's Lester," I said, and Godfrey flashed his torch into my face, then back to Swain's.

"But you're not alone."

"No; this is Mr. Godfrey."

"Mr. Godfrey?"

"Whose house we're staying at," I explained.

"Ah!" said Swain, and put one hand to his head and leaned heavily against the ladder.

"I think we'd better go to the house," Godfrey suggested, soothingly. "We all need a bracer. Then we can talk. Don't you think so, Mr. Swain?"

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Swain nodded vacantly, but I could see that he had not understood. His face was still working and he seemed to be in pain.

"I want to wash," he said, thickly. "I cut my wrist on that damned glass, and I'm blood all over, and my head's wrong, somehow." His voice trailed off into an unintelligible mumble, but he held one hand up into the circle of light, and I saw that his cuff was soaked with blood and his hand streaked with it.

"Come along, then," said Godfrey peremptorily. "You're right — that cut must be attended to," and he started toward the house.

"Wait!" Swain called after him, with unexpected vigour. "We must take down the ladders. We mustn't leave them here."

"Why not?"

"If they're found, they'll suspect — they'll know . . ." He stopped, stammering, and again his voice trailed away into a mumble, as though beyond his control.

Godfrey looked at him for a moment, and I could guess at the surprise and suspicion in his eyes. I myself was ill at ease, for there was something in Swain's face — a sort of vacant horror and dumb shrinking — that filled me with a vague repulsion. And then to see his jaw work-

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ing, as he tried to form articulate words and could not, sent a shiver over my scalp.

"Very well," Godfrey agreed, at last. "We'll take the ladders, since you think it so important. You take that one, Lester, and I'll take this."

I stooped to raise the ladder to my shoulder, when suddenly, cutting the darkness like a knife, came a scream so piercing, so vibrant with fear, that I stood there crouching, every muscle rigid. Again the scream came, more poignant, more terrible, wrung from a woman's throat by the last extremity of horror; and then a silence sickening and awful. What was happening in that silence?

I stood erect, gaping, suffocated, rising as from a long submersion. Godfrey's finger had slipped from the button of his torch, and we were in darkness; but suddenly a dim figure hurled itself past us, up the ladder.

With a low cry, Godfrey snatched at it, but his hand clutched only the empty air. The next instant, the figure poised itself on the coping of the wall and then plunged forward out of sight. I heard the crash of breaking branches, a scramble, a patter of feet, and all was still.

"It's Swain!" said Godfrey, hoarsely; "and that's a twelve-foot drop! Why, the man's mad!

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Hand me that ladder, Lester!" he added, for he was already at the top of the wall.

I lifted it, as I had done once before that night, and saw Godfrey slide it over the wall.

"Come on!" he said. "We must save him if we can!" and he, too, disappeared.

The next instant, I was scrambling desperately after him. The lawyer-Tartarin had vanished!

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CHAPTER VII

THE TRAGEDY

THE wall was masked on the other side by a dense growth of shrubbery, and struggling through this, I found myself on the gravelled path where I had seen Marjorie Vaughan. Before me, along this path, sped a shadow which I knew to be Godfrey, and I followed at top speed. At the end of a moment, I caught a flash of light among the trees, and knew that we were nearing the house; but I saw no sign of Swain.

We came to the stretch of open lawn, crossed it, and, guided by the light, found ourselves at the end of a short avenue of trees. At the other end, a stream of light poured from an open door, and against that light a running figure was silhouetted. Even as I saw it, it bounded through the open door and vanished.

"It's Swain!" gasped Godfrey; and then we, too, were at that open door.

For an instant, I thought the room was empty. Then, from behind the table in the centre, a demoniac, blood-stained figure rose into view, holding in its arms a white-robed woman. With a sort of nervous shock, I saw that the man was

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Swain, and the woman Marjorie Vaughan. A thrill of fear ran through me as I saw how her head fell backwards against his shoulder, how her arms hung limp. . . .

Without so much as a glance in our direction, he laid her gently on a couch, fell to his knees beside it, and began to chafe her wrists.

It was Godfrey who mastered himself first, and who stepped forward to Swain's side.

"Is she dead?" he asked.

Swain shook his head impatiently, without looking up.

"How is she hurt?" Godfrey persisted, bending closer above the unconscious girl.

Swain shot him one red glance.

"She's not hurt!" he said, hoarsely. "She has fainted — that's all. Go away."

But Godfrey did not go away. After one burning look at Swain's lowering face, he bent again above the still figure on the couch, and touched his fingers to the temples. What he saw or felt seemed to reassure him, for his voice was more composed when he spoke again.

"I think you're right, Swain," he said. "But we'd better call someone."

"Call away!" snarled Swain.

"You mean there's no one here? Surely, her father . . ."

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He stopped, for at the words Swain had burst into a hoarse laugh.

"Her father!" he cried. "Oh, yes; he's here! Call him! He's over there!"

He made a wild gesture toward a high-backed easy-chair beside the table, his eyes gleaming with an almost fiendish excitement; then the gleam faded, and he turned back to the girl.

Godfrey cast one astonished glance at him and strode to the chair. I saw his face quiver with sudden horror, I saw him catch at the table for support, and for an instant he stood staring down. Then he turned stiffly toward me and motioned me to approach.

In the chair a man sat huddled forward — a grey-haired man, clad in a white robe. His hands were gripping the chair-arms as though in agony. His head hung down almost upon his knees.

Silently Godfrey reached down and raised the head. And a cry of horror burst from both of us.

The face was purple with congested blood, the tongue swollen and horribly protruding, the eyes suffused and starting from their sockets. And then, at a motion from Godfrey's finger, I saw that about the neck a cord was tightly knotted. The man had been strangled.

Godfrey, after a breathless moment in which

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he made sure that the man was quite dead, let the head fall forward again. It turned me sick to see how low it sagged, how limp it hung. And I saw that the collar of the white robe was spotted with blood.

I do not know what was in Godfrey's mind, but, by a common impulse, we turned and looked at Swain. He was still on his knees beside the couch. Apparently he had forgotten our presence.

"It's plain enough," said Godfrey, his voice thick with emotion. "She came in and found the body. No wonder she screamed like that! But where are the servants? Where is everybody?"

The same thought was in my own mind. The utter silence of the house, the fact that no one came, added, somehow, to the horror of the moment. Those wild screams must have echoed from cellar to garret — and yet no one came!

Godfrey made a rapid scrutiny of the room, which was evidently the library, with a double door opening upon the grounds and another opposite opening into the hall. On the wall beside the inner door, he found an electric button, and he pushed it for some moments, but there was no response. If it rang a bell, the bell was so far away that we could not hear it.

A heavy curtain hung across the doorway.

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Godfrey pulled it aside and peered into the hall beyond. The hall was dark and silent. With face decidedly grim, he took his torch from one pocket and his pistol from another.

"Come along, Lester," he said. "We've got to look into this. Have your torch ready — and your pistol. God knows what further horrors this house contains!"

He pulled back the curtain, so that the hall was lighted to some extent from the open doorway, and then passed through, I after him. The hall was a broad one, running right through the centre of the house from front to rear. Godfrey proceeded cautiously and yet rapidly the whole length of it, flashing his torch into every room. They were all luxuriously furnished, but were empty of human occupants. From the kitchen, which closed the hall at the rear, a flight of stone steps led down into the basement, and Godfrey descended these with a steadiness I could not but admire. We found ourselves in a square, stone-flagged room, evidently used as a laundry. Two doors opened out of it, but both were secured with heavy padlocks.

"Store-rooms or wine-cellars, perhaps," Godfrey ventured, mounted the stairs again to the kitchen, and returned to the room whence we had started.

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Everything there was as we had left it. The dead man sat huddled forward in his chair; Swain was still on his knees beside the couch; the girl had not stirred. Godfrey went to the side of the couch, and, disregarding Swain's fierce glance, again placed his fingers lightly on the girl's left temple. Then he came back to me.

"If she doesn't revive pretty soon," he said, "we'll have to try heroic measures. But there must be somebody in the house. Let's look upstairs."

He led the way up the broad stairs, which rose midway of the hall, sending a long ray of light ahead of him. I followed in no very happy frame of mind, for I confess that this midnight exploration of an unknown house, with a murdered man for its only occupant, was getting on my nerves. But Godfrey proceeded calmly and systematically.

The hall above corresponded to that below, with two doors on each side, opening into bedroom suites. The first was probably that of the master of the house. It consisted of bedroom, bath and dressing-room, but there was no one there. The next was evidently Miss Vaughan's. It also had a bath and a daintily-furnished boudoir; but these, too, were empty.

Then, as we opened the door across the hall, a strange odour saluted us — an odour suggestive

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somehow of the East — which, in the first moment, caught the breath from the throat, and in the second seemed to muffle and retard the beating of the heart.

A flash of Godfrey's torch showed that we were in a little entry, closed at the farther end by a heavy drapery. Godfrey strode forward and swept the drapery aside. The rush of perfume was overpowering, and through the opening came a soft glow of light.

It was a moment before I got my breath; then a mist seemed to fall from before my eyes and a strange sense of exaltation and well-being stole through me. I saw Godfrey standing motionless, transfixed, with one hand holding back the drapery, and his torch hanging unused in the other, and I crept forward and peered over his shoulder at the strangest scene I have ever gazed upon.

Just in front of us, poised in the air some three feet from the floor, hung a sphere of crystal, glowing with a soft radiance which seemed to wax and wane, to quiver almost to darkness and then to burn more clearly. It was like a dreamer's pulse, fluttering, pausing, leaping, in accord with his vision. And as I gazed at the sphere, I fancied I could see within it strange, elusive shapes, which changed and merged and faded from moment to moment, and yet grew always clearer and more

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suggestive. I bent forward, straining my eyes to see them better, to fathom their meaning . . .

Godfrey, turning to speak to me, saw my attitude and shook me roughly by the arm.

"Don't do that, Lester!" he growled in my ear. "Take your eyes off that crystal!"

I tried to move my eyes, but could not, until Godfrey pulled me around to face him. I stood blinking at him stupidly.

"I was nearly gone, myself, before I realised the danger," he said. "A sphere like that can hypnotise a man more quickly than anything else on earth, especially when his resistance is lessened, as it is by this heavy perfume."

"It was rather pleasant," I said. "I should like to try it some time."

"Well, you can't try it now. You've got something else to do. Besides, it has two victims already."

"Two victims?"

"Look carefully, but keep your eyes off the sphere," he said, and swung me around toward the room again.

The room was shrouded in impenetrable darkness, except for the faint and quivering radiance which the sphere emitted, and as I plunged my eyes into its depths in an effort to see what lay there, it seemed to me that I had never seen black-

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ness so black. As I stared into it, with straining eyes, a vague form grew dimly visible beside the glowing sphere; and then I recoiled a little, for suddenly it took shape and I saw it was a man.

I had a queer fancy, as I stood there, that it was really a picture into which I was gazing — one of Rembrandt's — for, gradually, one detail after another emerged from the darkness, vague shadows took on shape and meaning, but farther back there was always more shadow, and farther back still more . . .

The man was sitting cross-legged on a low divan, his hands crossed in front of him and hanging limply between his knees. His clothing I could see but vaguely, for it was merged into the darkness about him, but his hands stood out white against it. He was staring straight at the crystal, with unwavering and unwinking gaze, and sat as motionless as though carved in stone. The glow from the sphere picked out his profile with a line of light — I could see the high forehead, the strong, curved nose, the full lips shaded by a faint moustache, and the long chin, only partially concealed by a close-clipped beard. It was a wonderful and compelling face, especially as I then saw it, and I gazed at it for a long moment.

"It's the adept, I suppose," said Godfrey, no longer taking care to lower his voice.

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It sounded unnaturally loud in the absolute stillness of the room, and I looked at the adept quickly, but he had not moved.

"Can't he hear you?" I asked.

"No — he couldn't hear a clap of thunder. That is, unless he's faking."

I looked again at the impassive figure.

"He's not faking," I said.

"I don't know," and Godfrey shook his head sceptically. "It looks like the real thing — but these fellows are mighty clever. Do you see the other victim? There's no fake about it!"

"I see no one else," I said, after a vain scrutiny.

"Look carefully on the other side of the sphere. Don't you see something there?"

My eyes were smarting under the strain, and for a moment longer I saw nothing; then a strange, grey shape detached itself from the blackness. It was an ugly and repulsive shape, slender below, but swelling hideously at the top, and as I stared at it, it seemed to me that it returned my stare with malignant eyes screened by a pair of white-rimmed glasses. Then, with a sensation of dizziness, I saw that the shape was swaying gently back and forth, in a sort of rhythm. And then, quite suddenly, I saw what it was, and a chill of horror quivered up my back.

It was a cobra.

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To and fro it swung, to and fro, its staring eyes fixed upon the sphere, its spectacled hood hideously distended.

The very soul within me trembled as I gazed at those unwinking eyes. What did they see in the sphere? What was passing in that inscrutable brain? Could it, too, reconstruct the past, read the mysteries of the future . . .

Some awful power, greater than my will, seemed stretching its tentacles from the darkness: I felt them dragging at me, certain, remorseless, growing stronger and stronger . . .

With something very like a shriek of terror, I tore myself away, out of the entry, into the hall, to the stairs, and down them into the lighted room below.

And as I stood there, gasping for breath, Godfrey followed me, and I saw that his face, too, was livid.

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CHAPTER VIII

A FRESH ENIGMA

GODFREY met my eyes with a little deprecating smile, put his torch in one pocket, took a handkerchief from another, and mopped his forehead.

"Rather nerve-racking, wasn't it, Lester?" he remarked, and then his gaze wandered to the couch, and he stepped toward it quickly.

I saw that a change had come in Miss Vaughan's condition. Her eyes were still closed, but her body no longer lay inert and lifeless, for from moment to moment it was shaken by a severe nervous tremor. Godfrey's face was very grave as he looked at her.

"Stop stroking her wrists, Swain," he said; "that does no good," and when Swain, without answering or seeming to hear, kept on stroking them, Godfrey drew the hands away, took Swain by the arm, and half-lifted him to his feet. "Listen to me," he said, more sternly, and shook him a little, for Swain's eyes were dull and vacant. "I want you to sit quietly in a chair for a while, till you get your senses back. Miss Vaughan is seriously ill and must not be disturbed in any way.

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I'm going to get a doctor and a nurse at once; they'll do what needs to be done. Until then, she must be left alone. Understand?"

Swain nodded vaguely, and permitted Godfrey to lead him to a chair near the outer door, where he sat down. As his hand fell across the arm of the chair, I could see that a little blood was still oozing from the wound on the wrist. Godfrey saw it, too, and picked up the hand and looked at it. Then he laid it gently down again and glanced at his watch. I followed his example, and saw that it was half-past one.

"Have you nerve enough to stay here half an hour by yourself, Lester?" he asked.

"By myself?" I echoed, and glanced at the dead man and at the quivering girl.

"I've got to run over to my place to get a few things and do some telephoning," he explained. "We must get a doctor up here at once; and then there's the police — I'll try to get Simmonds. Will you stay?"

"Yes," I said, "of course. But please get back as soon as you can."

"I will," he promised, and, after a last look around the room, stepped out upon the walk.

I went to the door and looked after him until the sound of his footsteps died away. Then, feeling very lonely, I turned back into the room.

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Those regular tremors were still shaking the girl's body in a way that seemed to me most alarming, but there was nothing I could do for her, and I finally pulled a chair to Swain's side. He, at least, offered a sort of companionship. He was sitting with his head hanging forward in a way that reminded me most unpleasantly of the huddled figure by the table, and did not seem to be aware of my presence. I tried to draw him into talk, but a slight nod from time to time was all I could get from him, and I finally gave it up. Mechanically, my hand sought my coat pocket and got out my pipe — yes, that was what I needed; and, sitting down in the open doorway, I filled it and lighted up.

My nerves grew calmer, presently, and I was able to think connectedly of the events of the night, but there were two things which, looked at from any angle, I could not understand. One was Swain's dazed and incoherent manner; the other was the absence of servants.

As to Swain, I believed him to be a well-poised fellow, not easily upset, and certainly not subject to attacks of nerves. What had happened to him, then, to reduce him to the pitiable condition in which he had come back to us over the wall, and in which he was still plunged? The discovery of the murder and of Miss Vaughan's senseless body

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might have accounted for it, but his incoherence had antedated that — unless, indeed, he knew of the murder before he left the grounds. That thought gave me a sudden shock, and I put it away from me, not daring to pursue it farther.

As to the house, its deserted condition seemed sinister and threatening. It was absurd to suppose that an establishment such as this could be carried on without servants, or with less than three or four. But where were they? And then I remembered that Godfrey and I had not completed our exploration of the house. We had stopped at the gruesome room where the adept and his serpent gazed unwinking into the crystal sphere. There was at least one suite on the same floor we had not looked into, and no doubt there were other rooms on the attic floor above. But that any one could have slept on undisturbed by those piercing screams and by our own comings and goings seemed unbelievable. Perhaps there were separate quarters in the grounds somewhere —

And then, without conscious will of my own, I felt my body stiffen and my fingers grip my pipe convulsively. A slow tremor seemed to start from the end of my spine, travel up it, and pass off across my scalp. There was someone in the room behind me; someone with gleaming eyes fixed upon me; and I sat there rigidly, straining my

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ears, expecting I knew not what — a blow upon the head, a cord about the neck. . . .

A rapid step came up the walk and Godfrey appeared suddenly out of the darkness.

"Well, Lester," he began; but I sprang to my feet and faced the room, for I could have sworn that I had heard behind me the rustle of a silken dress. But there was no one there except Swain and Miss Vaughan and the dead man — and none of them had moved.

"What is it?" Godfrey asked, stepping past me into the room.

"There was someone there, Godfrey," I said. "I'm sure of it — I felt someone — I felt his eyes on me — and then, as you spoke, I heard the rustle of a dress."

"Of a dress?"

"Or of a robe," and my thoughts were on the bearded man upstairs.

Godfrey glanced at me, crossed the room, and looked out into the hall. Then he turned back to me.

"Well, whoever it was," he said, and I could see that he thought my ears had deceived me, "he has made good his escape. There'll be a doctor and a nurse here in a few minutes, and I got Simmonds and told him to bring Goldberger along. He can't get here for an hour anyway. And I've

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got a change here for Swain," he added, with a gesture toward some garments he carried over one arm; "also a bracer to be administered to him," and he drew a flask from his pocket and handed it to me. "Maybe you need one, yourself," he added, smiling drily, "since you've taken to hearing rustling robes."

"I do," I said, "though not on that account," and I raised the flask to my lips and took a long swallow.

"Suppose you take Swain up to the bath-room," Godfrey suggested, "and help him to get cleaned up. I'll go down to the gate and wait for the doctor."

"The gate's probably locked."

"I thought of that," and he drew a small but heavy hammer from his pocket. "I'll smash the lock, if there's no other way. I'd like you to get Swain into shape before anyone arrives," he added. "He's not a prepossessing object as he is."

"No, he isn't," I agreed, looking at him, and I took the garments which Godfrey held out to me. Then I went over to Swain and put the flask into his uninjured hand. "Take a drink of that," I said.

He did not understand at first; then he put the flask to his lips and drank eagerly — so eagerly that I had to draw it away He watched me

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longingly as I screwed on the cap and slipped it into my pocket; and there was more colour in his face and a brighter light in his eyes.

"Now, come along," I said, "and get that cut fixed up."

He rose obediently and followed me out into the hall. Godfrey had preceded us, found the light-switch after a brief search, and turned it on.

"There's a switch in the bath-room, too, no doubt," he said. "Bring him down again, as soon as you get him fixed up. You'll find some cotton and gauze in one of the pockets of the coat."

Swain followed me up the stair and into the bath-room. He seemed to understand what I intended doing, for he divested himself of coat and shirt and was soon washing arms and face vigorously. Then he dried himself, and stood patiently while I washed and bandaged the cut on the wrist. It was not a deep one, and had about stopped bleeding.

"Feel better?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, and without waiting for me to tell him, slipped into the clean shirt which Godfrey had brought, attached the collar and tied the tie, all this quite composedly and without hesitation or clumsiness. Yet I felt, in some indefinable way, that something was seriously wrong with him. His eyes were vacant and his face flabby, as though

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the muscles were relaxed. It gave me the feeling that his intelligence was relaxed, too!

He picked up his own coat, but I stopped him.

"Don't put that on," I said, speaking to him as I would have spoken to a child. "The sleeve is blood-stained and there's a long tear down the side. Take this one," and I held out the light lounging-coat Godfrey had brought with him.

Swain laid down his own garment without a word and put on the other one. I rolled the soiled garments into a bundle, took them under my arm, turned out the lights, and led the way downstairs.

A murmur of voices from the library told me that someone had arrived, and when I reached the door, I saw that it was the doctor and the nurse. The former was just rising from a rapid examination of the quivering figure on the couch.

"We must get her to bed at once," he said, turning to Godfrey. "Her bedroom's upstairs, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Godfrey; "shall I show you the way?"

The doctor nodded and, lifting the girl carefully in his arms, followed Godfrey out into the hall. The nurse picked up a medicine-case from the floor and followed after.

I had expected Swain to rush forward to the couch, to make a scene, perhaps, and had kept my

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hand upon his arm; but to my astonishment he did not so much as glance in that direction. He stood patiently beside me, with his eyes on the floor, and when my restraining hand fell away, he walked slowly to the chair in which he had been sitting, and dropped into it, relaxing limply as with fatigue.

Godfrey was back in a moment.

"That doctor was the nearest one I could find," he said. "He seems to be all right. But if Miss Vaughan isn't better in the morning, I'll get a specialist out."

"Godfrey," I said, in a low tone, "there's something the matter with Swain," and I motioned to where he sat, flaccid and limp, apparently half-asleep. "He is suffering from shock, or something of that sort. It's something more, anyway, than over-wrought nerves. He seems to be only half-conscious."

"I noticed it," said Godfrey, with a little nod. "We'll have the doctor look at him when he comes down," and he sank wearily into a chair. "This has been a pretty strenuous night, Lester."

"Yes; and it isn't over yet. I wonder what the man with the snake is doing?"

"Still staring into the crystal, no doubt. Do you want to go and see?"

"No," I said decidedly, "I don't. Godfrey,"

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I added, "doesn't the absence of servants seem strange to you?"

"Very strange. But, I dare say, we'll find them around somewhere — though they seem to be sound sleepers! We didn't look through the whole house, you know. I'm not going to, either; I'm going to let the police do that. They ought to be here pretty soon. I told Simmonds to bring two or three men with him."

I glanced at the huddled body of the murdered man. With all the night's excitements and surprises, we had not even touched upon that mystery. Not a single gleam of light had been shed upon it, and yet it was the centre about which all these other strange occurrences revolved. Whose hand was it had thrown that cord about the throat and drawn it tight? What motive lay behind? Fearsome and compelling must the motive be to drive a man to such a crime! Would Simmonds be able to divine that motive, to build the case up bit by bit until the murderer was found? Would Godfrey?

I turned my head to look at him. He was lying back in his chair, his eyes closed, apparently lost in thought, and for long minutes there was no movement in the room.

At last the doctor returned, looking more cheerful than when he had left the room. He had

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given Miss Vaughan an opiate and she was sleeping calmly; the nervous trembling had subsided and he hoped that when she waked she would be much better. The danger was that brain fever might develop; she had evidently suffered a very severe shock.

"Yes," said Godfrey, "she discovered her father strangled in the chair yonder."

"I saw the body when I came in," the doctor remarked, imperturbably. "So it's her father, is it?"

"Yes."

"And strangled, you say?"

Godfrey answered with a gesture, and the doctor walked over to the body, glanced at the neck, then disengaged one of the tightly clenched hands from the chair-arm, raised it and let it fall. I could not but envy his admirable self-control.

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

"Not more than two or three hours," the doctor answered. "The muscles are just beginning to stiffen. It looks like murder," he added, and touched the cord about the neck.

"It *is* murder."

"You've notified the police?"

"They will be here soon."

I saw the doctor glance at Godfrey and then at

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me, plainly puzzled as to our footing in the house; but if there was a question in his mind, he kept it from his lips and turned back again to the huddled body.

"Any clue to the murderer?" he asked, at last.

"We have found none."

And then the doctor stooped suddenly and picked up something from the floor beside the chair.

"Perhaps this is a clue," he said, quietly, and held to the light an object which, as I sprang to my feet, I saw to be a blood-stained handkerchief.

He spread it out under our eyes, handling it gingerly, for it was still damp, and we saw it was a small handkerchief — a woman's handkerchief — of delicate texture. It was fairly soaked with blood, and yet in a peculiar manner, for two of the corners were much crumpled but quite unstained.

The doctor raised his eyes to Godfrey's.

"What do you make of it?" he asked.

"A clue, certainly," said Godfrey; "but scarcely to the murderer."

The doctor looked at it again for a moment, and then nodded. "I'd better put it back where I found it, I guess," he said, and dropped it beside the chair.

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And then, suddenly, I remembered Swain. I turned to find him still drooping forward in his chair, apparently half-asleep.

"Doctor," I said, "there is someone else here who is suffering from shock," and I motioned toward the limp figure. "Or perhaps it's something worse than that."

The doctor stepped quickly to the chair and looked down at its occupant. Then he put his hand under Swain's chin, raised his head and gazed intently into his eyes. Swain returned the gaze, but plainly in only a half-conscious way.

"It looks like a case of concussion," said the doctor, after a moment. "The left pupil is enlarged," and he ran his hand rapidly over the right side of Swain's head. "I thought so," he added. "There's a considerable swelling. We must get him to bed." Then he noticed the bandaged wrist. "What's the matter here?" he asked, touching it with his finger.

"He cut himself on a piece of glass," Godfrey explained. "You'd better take him over to my place, where he can be quiet."

"I've got my car outside," said the doctor, and together he and I raised Swain from the chair and led him to it.

He went docilely and without objection, and ten minutes later, was safely in bed, already dozing

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off under the influence of the opiate the doctor had given him. "He'll be all right in the morning," the latter assured me. "But he must have got quite a blow over the head."

"I don't know what happened to him," I answered. "You'll come back with me, won't you?"

"Yes; I may be useful," and he turned the car back the way we had come. "Besides," he added, frankly, "I'm curious to learn what happened in that house to-night."

He had certainly shown himself equal to emergencies, I reflected; and I liked his voice and his manner, which was cool and capable.

"My name is Lester," I said. "I'm a lawyer staying with Mr. Godfrey. We heard Miss Vaughan scream and ran over to the house, but we don't know any more than you do."

"My name is Hinman, and I'm just a country doctor," said my companion; "but if I can be of any help, I hope you'll call upon me. Hello!" he added, as we turned through the gate into the grounds of Elmhurst, and he threw on the brake sharply, for a uniformed figure had stepped out into the glare of our lamps and held up his hand.

The police had arrived.

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CHAPTER IX

FIRST STEPS

We found a little group of men gathered about the chair in which sat the huddled body. Two of them I already knew. One was Detective-sergeant Simmonds, and the other Coroner Goldberger, both of whom I had met in previous cases. Simmonds was a stolid, unimaginative, but industrious and efficient officer, with whom Godfrey had long ago concluded an alliance offensive and defensive. In other words, Godfrey threw what glory he could to Simmonds, and Simmonds such stories as he could to Godfrey, and so the arrangement was to their mutual advantage.

Goldberger was a more astute man than the detective, in that he possessed a strain of Semitic imagination, a quick wit, and a fair degree of insight. He was in his glory in a case like this. This was shown now by his gleaming eyes and the trembling hand which pulled nervously at his short, black moustache. Goldberger's moustache was a good index to his mental state — the more ragged it grew, the more baffling he found the case in hand!

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Both he and Simmonds glanced up at our entrance and nodded briefly. Then their eyes went back to that huddled figure.

There were three other men present whom I did not know, but I judged them to be the plain-clothes-men whom Simmonds had brought along at Godfrey's suggestion. They stood a little to one side until their superiors had completed the examination.

"I didn't stop to pick up my physician," Goldberger was saying. "But the cause of death is plain enough."

"Doctor Hinman here is a physician," I said, bringing him forward. "If he can be of any service. . . ."

Goldberger glanced at him, and was plainly favorably impressed by Hinman's dark, eager face, and air of intelligence and self-control.

"I shall be very glad of Dr. Hinman's help," said Goldberger, shaking hands with him. "Have you examined the body, sir?"

"Only very casually," answered Hinman. "But it is evident that the cause of death was strangulation."

"How long has he been dead?"

Hinman lifted the stiff hand again and ran his fingers along the muscles of the arm.

"About four hours, I should say."

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Goldberger glanced at his watch.

"That would put his death at a little before midnight. The murderer must have come in from the grounds, crept up behind his victim, thrown the cord about his neck and drawn it tight before his presence was suspected. The victim would hardly have remained seated in the chair if he had known his danger. After the cord was round his throat, he had no chance — he could not even cry out. There's one thing I don't understand, though," he added, after a moment. "Where did that blood come from?" and he pointed to the dark spots on the collar of the white robe.

Hinman looked up with a little exclamation.

"I forgot," he said. "Did you find the handkerchief? No, I see you didn't," and he pointed to where it lay on the floor. "I noticed it when I first looked at the body."

Without a word, Goldberger bent and picked up the blood-stained handkerchief. Then he and Simmonds examined it minutely. Finally the coroner looked at Godfrey, and his eyes were very bright.

"There can be only one inference," he said. "The dead man is not bleeding — the cord did not cut the flesh. The blood, then, must have come from the murderer. He must have been in-

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jured in some way — bleeding profusely. Look at this handkerchief — it is fairly soaked."

I am sure that, at that instant, the same thought was in Godfrey's mind which flashed through mine, for our eyes met, and there was a shadow in his which I knew my own reflected. Then I glanced at Hinman. He was looking at the handkerchief thoughtfully, his lips tightly closed. I could guess what he was thinking, but he said nothing.

Goldberger laid the handkerchief on the table, at last, and turned back to the body. He bent close above it, examining the blood spots, and when he stood erect again there was in his face a strange excitement.

"Lend me your glass, Simmonds," he said, and when Simmonds handed him a small pocket magnifying-glass, he unfolded it and bent above the stains again, scrutinising each in turn. At last he closed the glass with an emphatic little snap. "This case isn't going to be so difficult, after all," he said. "Those spots are finger-prints."

With an exclamation of astonishment, Simmonds took the glass and examined the stains; then he handed it to Godfrey, who finally passed it on to me. Looking through it, I saw that Goldberger was right. The stains had been made

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by human fingers. Most of them were mere smudges, but here and there was one on which faint lines could be dimly traced.

"They seem to be pretty vague," I remarked, passing the glass on to Hinman.

"They're plenty clear enough for our purpose," said Goldberger; "besides they will come out much clearer in photographs. It's lucky this stuff is so smooth and closely-woven," he added, fingering a corner of the robe, "or we wouldn't have got even those. It's as hard and fine as silk."

"How do you suppose those marks came there, Mr. Goldberger?" Godfrey asked, and there was in his tone a polite scepticism which evidently annoyed the coroner.

"Why, there's only one way they could come there," Goldberger answered impatiently. "They were put there by the murderer's fingers as he drew the cord tight. Do you see anything improbable in that?"

"Only that it seems too good to be true," Godfrey answered, quietly, and Goldberger, after looking at him a moment, turned away with a shrug of the shoulders.

"See if you can get the cord loose, Simmonds," he said.

The cord was in the form of a running noose,

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which had been knotted to hold it in place after being drawn tight. Although it had not cut the flesh of the neck, it had sunk deeply into it, and Simmonds worked at the knot for some moments without result. I suspect his fingers were not quite as steady as they might have been; but it was evidently an intricate knot.

"That's a new one on me," he said, at last. "I can't get it loose."

Godfrey bent close above it and looked at it.

"It *is* a peculiar knot," he agreed. "If you'll permit a suggestion, Mr. Goldberger, you'll cut the cord and leave the knot as it is. It may help us to find the man who made it."

"You're right," agreed Goldberger, promptly. "Cut the cord, Simmonds."

Simmonds got out his pocket-knife, opened it and slipped the blade under the cord, cut it, and pulled it out of the ridge of flesh. He looked at it a moment, and then handed it to Goldberger. The latter examined it carefully.

"It's stained with blood, too," he remarked, and passed it on to Godfrey.

"It looks like curtain-cord," Godfrey said, and made a little tour of the room. "Ah!" he added, after a moment, from the door opening into the grounds. "See here!"

He was holding up the end of the cord by which

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