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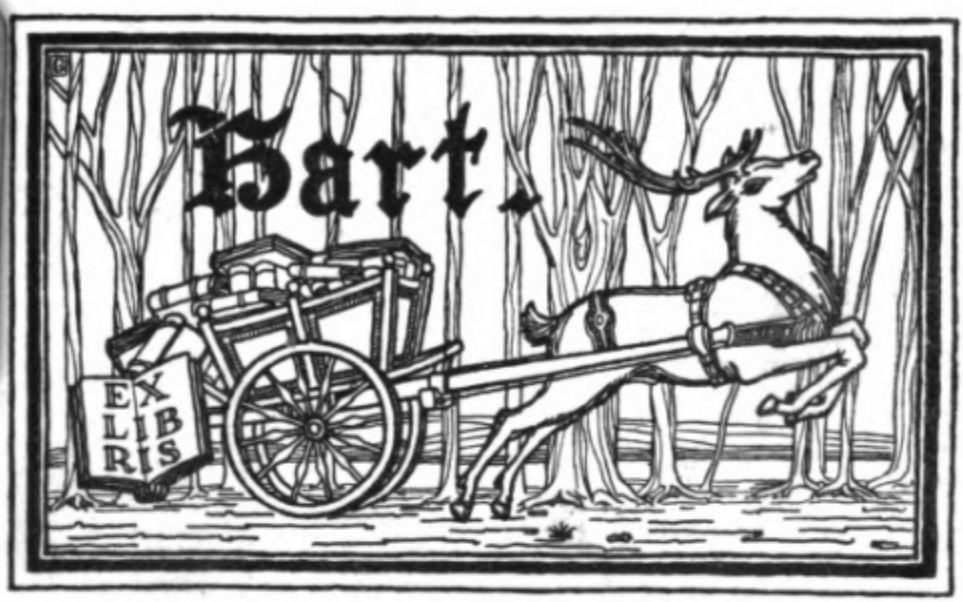

Albert Bushnell Bart

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The Millbank Case

A MAINE MYSTERY OF TO-DAY

BY

GEORGE DYRE ELDRIDGE

With a Frontispiece in Colour

By Eliot Keen

NEW YORK
HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY
1905

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THE MILLBANK CASE

CHAPTER I

A Statement of the Case

THEODORE WING had no known enemy in the world. He was a man of forty; "well-to-do," as they say in New England; a lawyer by profession, and already "mentioned" for a county judgeship. He was unmarried, but there were those who had hopes, and there was scarce a spinster in Millbank who hadn't a kindly word and smile for him—at times. He was not a church member, but it was whispered that his clergyman was disposed to look leniently on this shortcoming, for Wing was a regular attendant at service and liberal with money for church purposes, which, shrewd guessers said, some of the church members were not.

Wing lived in the River Road, just at the top of Parlin's Hill. He was from "over East, some-

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wheres," and had come to Millbank as a law student, when old Judge Parlin was at the head of the Maine bar. He became in turn chief clerk, junior partner, and finally full partner to the judge, and when the latter died—of disappointment, it was said, due to failure to secure the chief justiceship—Wing became the head of the firm, and finally the firm itself; for he had a dislike for partnerships, and at forty his office associates were employés associated in particular cases, not partners in the general business.

Judge Parlin was less than sixty years of age when he died and left a widow, the Parlin homestead, and an estate of private debts, that seemed to breed as Wing attempted to untangle affairs. For years his income had been large and his expenses small. His townsmen had rated him as their richest man who was not of the great Millbank logging firms. There was not a man but would have considered it an insult to the town to hint that Judge Parlin was worth less than a hundred thousand dollars. His investments turned out the veriest cats and dogs; and even in cases where the security might have been ample, the papers were often exe-

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cuted with such carelessness that collection rested on the honesty of the borrower and not on sufficiency of documentary evidence. In fact, the debts outvalued the resources two to one—that is, they seemed to, until it was announced that the Parlin homestead had been sold for a sum sufficient to pay all obligations and leave the widow a life income of five hundred dollars a year. People understood when it was learned that Wing himself was the purchaser.

Mrs. Parlin was fifty years of age at the time of her husband's death—a woman to whom stateliness had come with white hairs and the growth of ambition. From the hour of the judge's death, the devotion she had given him living turned to the protection of his good name. In a distant, cold way she had always shown a regard for Wing, which changed to more marked affection, when his interposition provided the means to meet the last of her husband's debts. She harboured no suspicion that the price paid for the homestead was beyond value. Not only had it been her home throughout her married life, but the judge had always spoken of its value in the large terms that were habitual with him in dealing

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with personal matters, and, from the moment when Wing discovered the condition of the estate, he held before her constantly the idea that the homestead would bring a price sufficient to cover the indebtedness. Indeed, she felt that she was making a sacrifice, when she consented to waive her dower rights, and chiefly she rejoiced that the purchaser was Wing and not a stranger.

It is possible that some suspicion attached in her mind to the purchase of the annuity, and this may have been confirmed by Wing's insistence that he would consent to occupy the homestead only on condition that she should make it her home for her lifetime. If, however, this was so, she proved herself large-minded enough to understand that her happiness—so far as this was possible to her now dwarfed life—was the best acknowledgment she could make to such a man, and during the five years since the judge's death, she had been the mistress of Wing's home.

The house stands at the crown of Parlin's Hill. The estate embraces twenty acres, divided nearly equally between farm land, meadow, and woodland.

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The portion lying west of River Road is an apple orchard, covering the slope of the hill from the road to the river. The roll of the land is to the south-west, where all through the summer days the sun lies in warm splendour, that seems to live in the heart and juices of the red and yellow fruit, which is the pride of Millbank. To have apples from the Parlin orchard, is to have the best that Millbank can give.

The house is near the road on the easterly side. The winter snows are too deep to warrant building far from the travelled roads, and for the same reason the buildings are connected one with another, under a continuous roof, so that the breaking of roads and paths is unnecessary for access to stock. The house is large and square, with a long wing stretching to the ample woodshed, through which one passes to the barns. The body of the buildings is white, and the shutters green. A drive runs to the south of the house, leading from the road to the doors of the great barn. It passes the side door of the main house, the door to the wing and the woodshed, and the buildings shelter it from the fierce northern

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winds. In the flower-beds that border this drive, under the shelter of the house, the earliest flowers bloom in spring and the latest in autumn.

Between the road and the front of the house is an enclosure of about half an acre—the "front yard," as Millbank names it. A footpath runs from the front gate to the main door of the house, dividing the enclosure into two nearly equal parts. This enclosure is crowded with flower-beds and shrubbery; the paths are bordered with box hedges, while a few great evergreens tower above the roof, and make the place somewhat gloomy on dull days. In midsummer, however, when the sun turns the corner and thrusts strongly into the enclosure, the deep shadows of the great trees are cool and inviting.

From the principal door, the main hall, broad and unencumbered, makes back until it is cut by the narrower hall from the south-side door. This side hall carries the stairs, and east of it are the dining room, kitchens, and pantries. The main hall goes on, in narrowed estate, between the dining room on the south and kitchens on the north, to the woodsheds. To the left, as one enters the house, is the great par-

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lour, seldom used, and a sitting room, the gloomiest room on the floor, for it has a northern outlook only.

In the angle of the two halls is the great room which Wing used as his library. It is some twenty-four by thirty-six feet, high-posted, and has a warm, sunny outlook to the south and west. It is lined with books and pictures; a great desk stands in the centre front, and lounges and easy chairs are scattered about in inviting confusion. The room above was his bedchamber, adjoining which is a bath-room, in its day the wonder and challenge of Mill-bank. An iron spiral stairway leads from the lower to the upper room, so that the occupant has the two rooms at his command independent of the remainder of the house. This was Wing's special domain. Outside these two rooms, Mrs. Parlin ruled as undisputed as during her thirty years of wifehood. Within, Wing held control, and while no small share of his personal work was done here, the great room saw much of his private life of which his everyday acquaintances had little suspicion. The cases contained many a volume that belongs to literature

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rather than law, and here he found that best of rest from the onerous demands of a constantly growing practice—complete change in matter and manner of thought.

On the night of the 10th of May, 1880, the light burned late in Lawyer Wing's library. It was the scandal of Millbank that this occurred often. The village was given to regarding the night as a time when no man should work. "Early to bed and early to rise" was its motto, and though an opposite practice had left Theodore Wing with more of health, wealth, and wisdom than most Millbankians possessed, he had never succeeded in reconciling his townsmen to his methods. But to-night conditions were more outrageous than usual. Mrs. Merrick, from the bed of an ailing grandchild, glanced up the hill at midnight and saw the light still burning. Old Doctor Portus, coming villageward from a confinement case, an hour later, saw the light as he passed the house and shook his head with dire prognostications. If Wing should be sick, old Doctor Portus would certainly not be called in attendance, and therefore he could measure this outrage of na-

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ture's laws with a mind uninfluenced by personal bias.

At four o'clock, however, a farmer's son, who had yielded the night to Millbank's temptations, hurrying farmward to his morning chores, saw no light growing dim in the first flush of the spring morning to attract his attention to a scene that later knowledge revealed. At six, the hired man came down the back stairs and went through the woodshed to the barns. Turning the heavy wooden bar that held the great doors fast, he swung them open and let in the soft morning air.

Then, his eye travelled along the stretch of house and he saw something that startled him. The side door was standing ajar—half open—and on the stone step was a huddled mass that looked strangely like a man, half lying and half crouching. Before the hired man had passed half the distance to the door, he knew that the huddled mass was Theodore Wing. His head and right arm rested on the threshold and held the door from closing; his body was on the stone step. There was blood spattered on the white of the westerly door-post, and the left

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temple of the man, which was upward as he lay, showed a spot around which the flesh was blackened as if powder-burnt, while between the head and the threshold a thin stream of blood still flowed and fell drop by drop on the stone below. The eyes were wide open and the look in them seemed to say that, suddenly as death had come, it had not come too suddenly for the man to realise that here had fallen the end of his hopes and ambitions, his strivings and accomplishments, in a form that left him powerless to strike a blow in his own behalf.

This murder was the most tragic event that had ever happened in the history of Millbank. It caused the more terror in that, so far as any one could understand, it was absolutely without motive. It was not known that Theodore Wing had an enemy in the world. Millbank was proud of him with a wholesome, kindly pride, which found much of self-gratulation in having such a citizen. Yet this man had been struck down by a murderer's hand, so silently that no sound had been heard, and the murderer had gone as he had come, without leaving trace of his coming or going.

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Contrary to expectation aroused by the first news, the house seemed not to have been entered. The whole of the crime was evidenced in the dead man on the stone step. Apparently, there had been a ring at the bell and a shot from a pistol, held close to the head of the man, as he stood in the doorway, by some one who had stationed himself at the easterly end of the doorstep, and who, his purpose accomplished, slipped into the darkness which had opened to give him way for this deed. It was uncanny in the extreme and gave a sense of insecurity to life that an ordinary murder, due to traceable causes, would have failed utterly to give.

The closest inspection furnished no clue. There was no footprint on the drive, and the grass at the end of the step, where the murderer must have stood, gave no token. And yet—here was another fearsome fact—the deed had been done by some one who knew the house and its peculiarities. The door had two bell-pulls, one on either door-post. Originally there had been only the one on the right or easterly post, and this was the general bell. When Wing took the library as his special room, he had a

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change made and the bell transferred to that room, so that his personal visitors could come and go without disturbing the house. In a little time, however, this proved very annoying, because most visitors came to this door, and he gave an order for a general bell to be put in. This he intended should also have a pull on the right-hand post, but the workman, who seemed to have no conception that one post could carry two pulls, put it on the left. Thus the post nearest Wing's room carried the general bell, and the further post his own, and neither of the bells could be heard on the premises devoted to the other. At first, this condition gave rise to troublesome mistakes, and Wing talked often of a change, but gradually the visitors to the house became accustomed to the condition and the need of a change disappeared.

It was clear, therefore, that whoever the murderer was, he had rung the bell which alone could be heard by the lawyer at his desk, and therefore must have been acquainted with the peculiarity of the bell-pulls. Had the lawyer had any cause to fear? Apparently not, for the shade to the window nearest his desk was raised and he evidently had answered the

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bell as a matter of course, not even taking with him a light. But, if he was seated at his desk, as seemed clearly the case, the man must have seen him as he came up the drive and might easily have shot him through the window. Why, then, had he called him to the door? The body had not been disturbed after it fell; the watch was in the fob, and money in the pocket. Murder was evidently the murderer's purpose; yet he had summoned his victim, when clearly he had him in his power without so doing.

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CHAPTER II

Mrs. Parlin Testifies

IN addition to the ill-fated lawyer, there were but three people in the Parlin household—the widow; a general house girl, Mary Mullin; and the hired man, Jonathan Oldbeg, a nephew of the Mullin woman. Oldbeg was about thirty, and his aunt forty. The widow's room was in the northwest corner of the second floor, while that of the Mullin woman was over the kitchen. The hired man slept over the woodshed. All the windows of the three rooms gave to the north, excepting two in Mrs. Parlin's room, which opened to the west, overlooking the orchard and the river.

Mrs. Parlin was a tall, striking woman who carried her head, crowned with waves of white hair, with an air that some named queenly, and others by that terrible New England word "conceited." The death of her husband had been a terrible blow to her soaring ambitions; but this she had outlived, at least

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to outward seeming. Childless, as well as husbandless, the dormant maternal instinct, which is a part of every true woman, had stirred to life under the care lavished upon her by Wing, whose years were sufficiently less than her own to give a natural tone to the pseudo relation of mother and son. Nevertheless, there had been something of the maternal in her relationship to the judge—of that phase of the maternal which gives to natural weakness courage for defence. It was not in personal finance alone that the judge was a grown-up boy. The sense of fear was so little developed as to amount scarce to caution. Scrupulous in duty, he gave no thought to the enemies or enmities he created, while she saw in these not alone threats to his professional career, but as well danger of a personal nature. Even she, standing guard as she did, had not been able to save him from enemies who defeated his noble ambition and would, as she believed, as readily have destroyed him. As the intensity of her grief softened with time, the solicitude with which she had followed her husband's career, was transferred to Wing, but with less of the factor of self than it possessed of old, with

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the result that she grew more lovable and companionable, and gained a friendly interest from the village which had not been hers during the judge's lifetime.

To this recovered peace of mind the tragic death of Wing came as a crushing blow, the full weight of which few realised until the broken, haggard woman was seen of the public for the first time at the inquest. Years seemed to have left their impress upon her, and there were many who noted that the immediate physical effect was as much more marked than that following the judge's death, as Wing's death had been the more tragic. Her husband's death left to her the responsibility of protecting his name, in co-operation with his partner and friend. Wing's death snatched away the last prop and stay of her years. Husbandless and childless, to her life had no further meaning, and while the community was whispering that she was again rich—for it was known that she was the principal legatee of the dead lawyer's will—she was looking down the years with a dread that made hope impossible.

Her testimony was of the briefest. She had said

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"good-night" to Wing at half-past nine. She had gone to the library for that purpose, as was her custom evenings when he did not sit with her in her own sitting room till her early bedtime.

"Was it his custom to spend the evening in your sitting room or the library?" the coroner asked.

"Two or three evenings a week he spent in my sitting room. The other evenings in the library, when he was at home."

"Was he away much, evenings?"

"Only when he was at court in Augusta or Portland. When he had cases at Norridgewock he always drove home at night."

"At what time did you have supper?"

"At six."

"On the night of the murder?"

The witness nodded, too much affected to speak her answer.

"Who was present at supper?"

"Theodore and myself."

"Mary Mullin and Oldbeg did not eat with you?"

This was a sore spot in Millbank's estimate of the widow Parlin. The town still held it a Christian

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duty for "help" to eat at the same table with their employers. Every departure from this primitive rule was occasion for heart-burnings and recriminations.

"They ate by themselves in the kitchen."

There was a slight raising of the head, a shadow, as it were, of the old self-assertive pride, which in other days would have made itself manifest in answering this question. So deep was Millbank in the tragedy that the audience almost lost the weight of the heinous fact confessed in this answer.

"Did you go directly to your sitting room after supper?"

"No, we went out into the front yard, to look at the flower-beds, and then crossed the road to the orchard and walked through that to the river-bank."

"From there you returned to the house?"

"Yes."

"Where did you go on your return?"

"To my sitting room. He lighted my lamp and then excused himself, because of some work he had to do."

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"When did you see him again?"

"At half-past nine, when I went to bid him good-night."

"Are you certain of the time?"

"Yes; for I stopped to wind the clock as I went through the hall, and noticed that it was exactly half-past nine."

"There are two doors to the library, are there not—one from the main hall and one from the side?"

"Yes."

"By which one did you enter the library?"

"By the one from the side hall."

"Which is near the side door of the house?"

Again she had to nod assent. This was the door through which Wing had passed to his death.

"Did you knock at the door before entering?"

"Always."

Again that slight suggestive raising of the head.

"Did he open the door for you?"

"Yes. He knew my knock, and always came to open the door."

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"Did you notice anything peculiar about him or the room?"

"I did not."

"Was there anything to indicate whether he was writing or reading when you knocked?"

"He had a book in his left hand and the light was on a small table by his reading chair."

"This reading chair and table, where were they in the room?"

"Before the fireplace, about the centre of the north side."

"Was there a fire in the fireplace?"

"Yes; there were a few wood coals."

"Was it a cold night?"

"No; but he was very fond of a wood fire and when the evening was not too warm had one, even if he had to have a window open."

"Was the window open that night?"

"Yes; the one nearest the River Road, overlooking the driveway."

"That was the nearest window to the desk?"

"The nearest of the south windows. The desk stood between the two west windows."

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"Did you notice whether the shades were drawn?"

"They were drawn to the west windows, but were raised to all four of the south windows."

"Were you long in the room?"

"Only long enough to say 'good-night' and ask him not to read too late."

"What did he say to this?"

"Laughed, as he always did, when I spoke of his sitting up late, and," in a voice that was almost a sob; "said, 'You know, mother, I can't get over my bad habits, but really to-night I'm only going to read a chapter or two more, for I must write a letter and then go to bed. I've got a busy day to-morrow.'"

"Was that all he said?"

"Excepting 'good-night.'"

"Do you recall anything in his manner, tone, or words that indicated trouble or apprehension of any kind?"

"Nothing. He was, as always, cheerful and, seemingly, happy, and laughed quite carelessly when he spoke of his bad habit."

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"When did you next see him?"

The question came with a suddenness that startled every one who heard it, including the witness. She grew white and for a moment swayed as if she would fall. Dr. Rogers, her physician, stepped towards her, but before he could reach her side, she recovered by what seemed a supreme effort of the will, and, raising her head, answered:

"In the morning, a little after six, lying dead on the threshold of the south door."

Then her head dropped on the table in front of her, and her face was hidden from the gaze of her curious neighbours, but not a sob was heard. She had spent her tears long before.

At an adjourned session, she testified that she had heard no unusual noise during the night. She was a sound sleeper and did not wake easily. She had fallen asleep soon after hearing the clock strike ten. She did not recall awaking until aroused by the noise made by Mary Mullin knocking at her door, soon after six o'clock, to tell her of the discovery of the murder.

"Do you believe that a pistol shot could have been

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fired at your side door and you not hear it?" the coroner asked, with that sudden sharpness he had at times.

"I am compelled to believe that it did occur;" and there was to more than one onlooker an air of defiance in the answer.

"In advance of this, would you believe it possible?" he demanded.

She looked at him as if weighing the question and its purpose, and then said deliberately:

"No."

The answer manifestly accorded with the sense of the spectators, among whom there were sundry exchanges of glances not all friendly to the witness. But the coroner was speaking again:

"Mrs. Parlin, what do you know of the parentage of the late Theodore Wing?"

Every head was bent towards the witness to catch the answer to what the veriest dullard suspected was the most important question thus far asked. The witness grew pale—paler than she had been at any time, and there came into her bearing a touch of defiance rather felt than seen. She was appar-

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ently arming herself against coroner and spectators.

"He was the son of Judge Parlin."

If she had aimed at sensation, she could not have hoped for greater success. A murmur of surprise ran about the room, and the confusion rose to a height that for a time defied the efforts of the coroner to preserve order. Curiosity to hear further questions and answers came to his aid, and silence was restored.

"By a former marriage?"

"No. He was born out of wedlock."

"When did you first learn of this?"

"On the eleventh of this month."

"The day succeeding the murder?"

"Yes."

"How did you learn of it?"

"From a paper in the judge's handwriting, found in Theodore's desk, and enclosed in an envelope addressed 'Mrs. Amelia Parlin; Mr. Theodore Wing; to be opened and read by the survivor, in event of the death of either, and until such death to remain unopened.'"

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"Was this inscription also in the handwriting of your late husband?"

Now many noted that she had said "Judge Parlin," and not "my late husband," as if she would remind them from the start of the public's share in his acts, rather than of her own.

"It was."

"Please produce that paper."

The witness drew forth a large square envelope and handed it to the coroner, who said to the jury:

"I regret that I am compelled to read to you a paper which was evidently intended for one person's reading only, and that Mrs. Parlin or Mr. Wing, according as the one or the other should be the longest-lived. The circumstances of the death which placed this in the hands of the other for perusal, leaves no alternative. Before reading, let me say, I was a townsman of Judge Parlin: I had the honour to know him intimately, and notwithstanding what I am about to read you, I still hold it an honour. He was an able lawyer, an upright judge, a good citizen, and, I may add, a noble man. If he sinned, who of us is there that is without sin? If there be such, let

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him cast the first stone. I am not entitled to do so."

The widow sat with head held high, as if there had come to her again the old strength that so many felt was gone forever. When her husband was in question, her courage had no limit. She flinched from no eye that was turned towards her, but there was that in her own which seemed to resent even the kindly words of the coroner, as if in protest that they implied wrong in her husband's past which she would not for one instant admit. It was not for them to accuse, still less to excuse. What he had done was a thing that concerned him and his God alone, and her look said more plainly than words, " neither do I accuse him!" The instinct of defence covered her as a shield.

Meantime the coroner read:

" 'There were three persons who had the right to know what I am about to write. One died many years ago. Until another dies, these words are not to be read. In the course of nature, it is probable that the reading will fall to Theodore, not to my wife. If so, I believe that when Theodore reads

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them, I will already have been reunited to my wife and will have told her all that I write here, and so told it that she will feel my sincerity more clearly than I can make it felt by any written words.

"'Although born and raised in Millbank, I read law in the office of Judge Murdock in Bangor. My father had a great admiration for the judge and, dying early, before he had seen me admitted to the bar, asked his friend to take me into his office. If I have attained anything of note in my profession, I owe it largely to the fidelity with which Judge Murdock discharged his trust.

"'While in his office and shortly before I returned to Millbank, I became involved with a young woman of Bangor, who became by me the mother of the man now known as Theodore Wing—he will find his name legally established by action of the Legislature in 1841. Unfortunately, I can say little that is good of her; I will say nothing otherwise, if I can avoid it. I shirk no part of the responsibility for the wrong done. God alone knows that if she failed in true womanhood, then or after, it was not I who was wholly to blame. Thus much I can say, she was and

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is a woman of brilliant mind and shrewd resources, which have carried her far socially.

"'Fortunately I did not lack money, and so was able to provide comfortably for the woman and her child. As a matter of justice, I offered marriage, but she made it a condition that her child should be placed in some institution, urging that it would otherwise always be a stigma upon us. To this I would not consent, and her election to forego the vindication of marriage put me on my guard, for I could not believe that a woman of her temperament would deliberately elect to go through life encumbered with an unfathered child. The event proved me right, for within three months she had placed the infant in an institution for orphans, and returned to Bangor with a plausible tale accounting for her absence.

"'She, of course, counted safely on my silence, but I did not hesitate to make it a condition that I should take possession of the child for whom I provided, rearing him in such a way that he has taken a place in the world equal to that of his parents, and as untrammelled by his unsuspected birth as it is possible for one to be. My marriage has never been

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blessed with children, and thus to him and my wife of thirty years, the two on earth whose claim upon me is most sacred, I am able to leave all that I have accumulated.

"'He has been to me all that a son could be. Let this narrative be to him, if he ever reads it, an explanation of anything in which I have been less than a father to him.

"'I see no necessity for continuing this narrative further, save that it may be to my son a relief to know something more of his mother, and to my wife a joy to know that my wrong did not bring a woman to misery and worldly ruin. Within a year of her desertion of my son, I attended her wedding to a man of equal social rank, who has since risen to wealth and political power. She has been a notable aid to him, and her name is well-nigh as often pronounced in connection with his fortunes as is his own. She is the mother of children who have taken good social positions, and some of whom seem to have inherited their mother's brilliance of mind and unflinching purpose and their father's ability in money and power getting. To say more than this, even to

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the two dear ones, of whom one alone is to read these lines, would be an injustice to the woman herself and to her children. To her influence, exerted against me, I attribute my failure to secure the chief justiceship. As great as was the disappointment, I can write the fact to-day without bitterness toward her and without purpose to accuse her of injustice. If by meeting the penalty of my sin, I can avert it from others, I am content.' "

Unless one knew the unbending spirit of the man in matters of right and wrong, he must fail to understand the keenness of feeling covered by the apparently cold, formal statement of fact to which Judge Parlin had confined his written words. To the witness on the witness rack, however, those words were as if the living man spoke again and laid bare a heart torn with the humiliation of self-condemnation, more terrible to him than the judgment of any human tribunal. Realising the bitterness of spirit in which he had spoken, she was stirred anew by that long-dead instinct of protection, which had made her weakness a shield in the past to his strength, and held high her head, too proud of her dead to allow

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any one to find in her the faintest blame for this strong spirit whose words she, and she alone, read to their last meaning.

The hush that followed the reading was that strong suspension of every function which betokens deep emotion. Before the mass had recovered, the coroner's voice broke harshly upon them:

"When did you first know of the existence of this paper?"

"The paper itself on the eleventh. I saw the envelope and its address by accident a week or ten days before."

"Can you fix the exact date?"

"I cannot. I saw it by accident, as I have said, and I assumed it related to something Judge Parlin had desired done in the event named on the envelope. I asked no questions regarding it."

"Will you state on oath that you knew nothing of the contents of this paper until after the death of Mr. Theodore Wing?"

The white head went up, and there was a sting of rebuke in the tone in which the answer came:

"I was under oath when I gave my testimony. I

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stated then that I first learned of this paper and its contents on May eleventh. I can add nothing to that."

"Did you ever suspect the relationship of your husband to Mr. Wing prior to the eleventh of this month, when you saw this paper?"

"I did not."

"Would a knowledge of that relationship, if you had known it while he was living, have changed in any way your feeling towards Mr. Wing?"

The witness paused as if she would question her own heart before answering, and the coroner waited patiently, with apparent understanding of the need. A hush fell on the room, like that which had followed the reading of the remarkable paper. Then Mrs. Parlin looked directly at the coroner and answered distinctly and without a tremor in her voice:

"I think it would."

"Thank you," said the coroner. "I am sorry if I have in any way disturbed you unnecessarily in this examination. I know that you believe I have aimed simply at my duty."

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CHAPTER III

Alive at Midnight

AN hour after the close of the day's session, Mrs. Parlin was in her sitting room, with the door closed and the shades lowered. On the opposite side of the small light-stand sat a rather undersized man, plainly dressed, and of somewhat insignificant aspect. Distinctly, the woman in her was disappointed.

"I have sent for you, Mr. Trafford," she said, slowly and apparently reluctantly, "because both my husband and Theodore—Mr. Wing—had the utmost confidence in your ability. I want you to find Mr. Wing's murderer. It's not a matter of cost—I simply want him found."

As she spoke, she gathered confidence, and the tone of her final words almost evidenced a belief that he could do what she asked. She stopped speaking, and the insignificance of the man's appearance was again more real to her and sent a chill over her earnestness.

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"If you entrust the case to me," he said, in a tone singularly winning for a man in his station and of his personal appearance, "I shall do my best to sustain the confidence Judge Parlin and Mr. Wing gave me; but let me warn you, in my profession there is no royal road. I have no instinct that enables me to scent a murderer or other criminal. I reach results by hard work, close attention to details, and perseverance. I make it a condition of undertaking any case that nothing shall be concealed from me. I must start with at least the knowledge that my principal possesses."

"I've told everything to the coroner. If I'm not mistaken, you've heard the testimony." She spoke with dignity, almost with hostility, in her voice.

"I heard the testimony," he said, "but are you sure you've told everything? There's sometimes things that we know which aren't facts—that is, not facts as the term is understood when one is giving testimony."

"For instance?"

"You have impressions of what led up to this tragedy." There was nothing of question in his

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tone. It was as if he stated what was indisputable.

The statement seemed to strike her and to arouse a new train of thought. She was silent for some time, and he sat watching anxiously, but without a sign of impatience. At last she looked up and answered:

"You are mistaken; I'm absolutely in the dark. There's nothing to point in any direction."

He accepted the disappointment, but accepted it as absolute. He evidently had striven by the assertion so positively made to surprise her into new thought, with the hope that it might hit on something that in his skilled hands would have meaning. He saw not only that he had not succeeded, but that there was no ground for success.

"That, in itself," he said, "is significant. It shows that we must dig deeper in his life than we have yet done. The motive; we want the motive!"

"There was no motive," she said. "It was motiveless. There are men who do murder for murder's sake." Under sting of her life experience, she spoke with keen bitterness.

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He leaned across the table, and for the instant she saw something in the man she had not seen before; something that flashed like a gleam of new intelligence and was gone with its very birth.

"There are no motiveless crimes," he said. "In this case, of all others, you may be sure a motive existed, and that when we put our hands on it, we shall find it a tremendous one—that is, tremendous in its imperative force."

"But what could be the motive—against a man like him?"

"Because he was such a man, we may be the more certain of motive," he said. "Under other conditions it might have been Judge Parlin." He spoke at hazard—perhaps; but the effect was something startling. She grew pale as at the inquest before she answered as to the first knowledge of Wing's death, and her companion expected for the moment that she would faint. But she was a woman equal to noteworthy sudden efforts, and even as he watched she overcame the momentary weakness. Yet it was with pale lips she stammered:

"I understand. It might have been the judge."

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Trafford waited, seemingly expecting something more, but when the pause grew awkward, he continued, "He told you he had a letter to write before he went to bed. Had he written it?"

"I don't know. It's a thing we never shall know."

"It's a thing that we will know, and that in a very short time. Who entered the room first that morning?" and there was a sense of action in his tone that caused her to look up with sudden interest.

"I did. Mary told me expressly that she hadn't dared open the door until I came, and Jonathan was by the body, outside."

"Was the door closed?"

"Yes."

"Who closed it?"

"I have never asked. I supposed it hadn't been open."

"It was open," he said. "He came to the door without a light when the bell rang. Naturally, he left the door open so that the light from the room would shine through. He would leave it wide open, to get the full light. Somebody shut that door!"

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Mary and Jonathan were called and questioned. The latter set the matter at rest. When he discovered the body he stooped over it to make certain that Mr. Wing was dead. Then, remembering to have heard that you must not touch a murdered man until the coroner comes, he arose without touching him and as he did so saw through the outer door that the door to the library was closed.

"The outer door was wide open?" Trafford said.

"No, sir, 'twant neither. 'Twas against Mr. Wing's head and arm. If it hadn't been fur them, it would 'a' shut too."

After the two had gone, Trafford declared he would see the room, but proposed first to do so alone. He entered from the main hall, set his light on the lamp-mat on the writing-desk, and took his station in front of the door from the side hall. Here he stood for at least ten minutes studying the room. Then he walked to a medium-sized safe that stood to the right of the fire-jamb and was partially hidden by book-shelves near the door from the side hall.

Having studied this for some time, he made a minute examination of every part of the room, in-

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cluding the blotting paper in the writing-pad on the desk, which he finally lifted carefully and held before the mirror to examine the few ink-marks it showed. Of these he took note in a small memorandum book. They seemed to be the only things that struck his attention particularly. Then he rang and told Mary to ask Mrs. Parlin to come to the library.

"Is that the blotting-pad that was here that night?" he asked. "And you were the first one who came to this desk in the morning?" when she had answered him as to the identity of the pad. "And there was no letter on the desk?"

"None."

"Then, evidently he had not written the letter he told you of?"

"Evidently not," she assented.

"Then he must have been killed before he had time to write?"

"It would seem so."

"And, therefore, probably very soon after you left him?"

"I can see no other conclusion, unless he changed his mind and didn't write," she assented.

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"Now we come to one of the impressions which you could not testify to as a fact, but which may be of far more value. Did he say he had a letter to write in a way that makes you think he may have changed his mind?"

"No," she said. "I understood, from the way in which he said it, that it was the important thing he had to do before going to bed. I went away satisfied that he would write the letter early and then get to bed. He certainly meant that the next day was to be a busy one."

"Then he probably was killed very soon, since he had not written the letter."

"I think so."

"Now, if you please, let me send for Jonathan again."

When the hired man came, he glanced over his shoulder in an uneasy way, as if he did not more than half like the room. Trafford motioned him to a chair and without any preliminaries suddenly demanded:

"At what hour are you going to testify that you went to bed that night?"

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Thus far Oldbeg had simply been called upon to testify to the finding of the body. The remainder of his testimony was to be given later.

"About nine o'clock; not more'n five minutes one way or 'tother."

"What were you doing on Canaan Street at five minutes after midnight?"

Oldbeg looked frightened, and Mrs. Parlin showed considerable anxiety in the look she cast on the two men.

"Come," said Trafford sharply. "If I can find out you were there, I can find out why you were there. I'd rather hear it from you."

"I was comin' from the twelve-o'clock train. My cousin, Jim Shepard, went to Portland to work an' I saw him off."

"Be careful," Trafford warned him. "If you were coming from the station, you'd have come up Somerset Street, not Canaan."

"Why, ye see," the man explained, placed at once at his ease in having something to tell of which he had knowledge; "Jim, he was spendin' the evenin' with his gal, Miss Flanders, in Canaan Street, an'

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I was to call fur him thar; an' he was so late we couldn't get round to the station, an' so we made a short cut through Gray's Court an' jest catched the train, an' that was all. We had to run, or he'd 'a' missed it any way. So I come back that way, instead o' through Somerset Street."

"Then you came through Canaan Street to River Road——"

"No, I didn't," the other interrupted. "I cut across lots back o' Burgess, 'cause 'twas shorter, an' struck River Road down in front of Miller's."

"Yes; and then came up to the driveway and so into the house?"

"Yep!"

"You must have got in about ten minutes after twelve."

"Jest to a dot!" he exclaimed in evident admiration of the other's shrewdness. "Jest to a dot. I looked to my watch an' 'twas jest ten minutes arter midnight."

"Then you must have passed close to the side-door step?"

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"Yess'r; fact, ye might say, I hit agin it, for I did knock my toe agin it as I passed."

"Was Mr. Wing's body there then?" The demand was quick and imperative.

"No, siree! Do you s'pose I'd 'a' waited till mornin' to rout 'em out ef it had ben? Mr. Wing was in this ere room."

"How do you know?"

"I saw his shadder on the curtain. He was walkin' up an' down. I seed him turn as I come up the drive."

"But why didn't you see him? The shade was up to that window, when he was found in the morning."

"Yep; but they was all down when I come up the drive, an' I saw his shadder agin 'em."

Further questioning elicited no added information from the man, excepting the statement that as his cousin Jim swung on to the rear end of the car, another man had swung on to the front end, suddenly rushing out of the darkness. Jonathan did not know who it was; indeed, had hardly given the matter a thought, so anxious had he been lest Jim should be

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left. When he had gone, Trafford turned to Mrs. Parlin and asked:

"When do you think Mr. Wing intended writing that letter, if he hadn't written it at ten minutes after midnight?"

"He must have changed his mind, after all," she answered.

"Evidently, he did," he said.

Then he took up the matter of Judge Parlin's confession.

"I do not wish to pain you," he said, "but I would not be justified in letting that drop without going into it further. Have you any suspicion who Theodore's mother was—or is, since she is still living, or was between five and six years ago?"

"I haven't the faintest suspicion," she said. "But surely this has been raked open enough. You can let that wound heal."

"I can let nothing heal," he said. "I don't for the life of me see how that can have anything to do with this murder, but that's no reason I may not find that it has lots to do with it. At any rate, I must find her out."

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"Can you do it on the feeble clue we have?" she asked.

He smiled.

"On such a clue, I'll trace her in a week and not half try. Your husband intended to shield her from discovery, and but for these untoward circumstances, we would be bound to respect his wishes. As it is, I must know the identity of the woman. I hope I'll find nothing to compel me to go farther. In the meantime, I'm going to take with me this blotting-pad, and I want you to examine it so that you can identify it beyond question, blotter and all. It's too important for any mistake."

Just then Mary Mullin brought word that Mr. McManus had come in response to a message sent earlier in the evening by Mr. Trafford. Mr. McManus had been with Mr. Wing for a number of years, and held the most confidential relation to his principal of any in the office. Since the murder he had naturally taken charge of his personal affairs. He was a man of thirty, tall and lithe, with a nervous force about him that was held well in control by strong will-power.

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"Do you know what special engagements Mr. Wing had for the eleventh, that caused him to expect a particularly busy day?" the detective asked.

"None connected with office matters. It must have been a personal engagement."

"Did you open this safe the day after the murder?"

"Yes."

"Was it properly closed and locked?"

"So far as I could see."

"I'd have given a hundred dollars if I'd been here," Trafford said earnestly.

McManus looked at him in surprise.

"Certainly," he said, "you don't suspect robbery?"

"I don't suspect anything," Trafford replied, somewhat brusquely. "Of all things, I avoid suspicion and guesses. I'd like you to open the safe again."

McManus knelt, drew from his pocket a paper with a series of figures written on it, and following these with the turnings of the knob, threw open the door. Within was revealed a small iron door sur-

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rounded by pigeon-holes, the divisions of wood. Trafford dropped on his knees and gave peculiar scrutiny to the door, and especially the lock. Then he turned towards McManus:

"These two empty pigeon-holes on the left; they were empty when you first opened the safe?"

"Every paper is in the exact place I found it," McManus answered sharply. "My profession has taught me some things!"

"And this door?"

"It was closed and locked. Here is the key."

Trafford opened the door, revealing packages of letters, filling about half the space above the small drawer which was at the lowest portion.

"You have examined these letters?"

"Only sufficiently to be able to identify them. They relate to certain logging interests of firms employing Mr. Wing."

"And the drawer?"

"You have the key: there's nothing there but trinkets and a little personal jewelry." There was a personal tone of resentment over the failure to

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recognise the distance between a detective and an attorney.

Trafford opened the drawer mechanically, then closed it and took out indifferently one of the packages of letters. These he returned and closed and locked the door, which he examined again with care. Then he pushed to the heavy outer door, turning the knob slowly and as if he was studying the fall of the wards.

"If it had been planned to leave no trace," he said, as if to himself, "it would be a success. Have you a suspicion of the motive for this murder, Mr. McManus?"

"So far as I can see, it was motiveless," McManus answered. "I can only conclude that it was the work of a lunatic, or a mere murder fiend. It was, in my opinion, merely an accident that it was Mr. Wing and not some one else."

"I hadn't thought of that aspect of the case," Trafford said. "Is there any unfortunate creature of that kind about here?"

"No, not that I know of; but might it not be a stranger that has wandered here?"

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"Did you ever hear of one of that class that was content with mere killing? It's mutilation that characterises all such crimes. Its absence in this case is one of the most prominent features. By the bye: was the night of the tenth windy?"

"On the contrary, it was a very still night."

"Not wind enough to blow that door shut?" pointing to the door into the side hall.

"Certainly not."

Trafford walked around to the different windows and finally pulled down the shades and placed the lamp on the writing-desk. Then he went outside and studied the reflection on the shades. When he returned, he said:

"I shall be absent a few days. Will you see to it, Mr. McManus, that the coroner doesn't reconvene the inquest until I can be here? Until we find a motive for this crime, we're going to make slow headway in finding the criminal."

"So long as you have charge of the case," McManus answered, "I shall follow your wishes; but you may as well understand that I'm not going to be content with failure on any one's part. You're

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after the pay; I'm after punishment for the murderer. As long as our wishes run in the same line——"

Trafford interrupted him:

"When a case is placed in your hands, you expect to manage it, I assume. This case has been placed in my hands, and as long as it remains there, I shall conduct it in my own way. That doesn't mean I won't take advice; it simply means, I'll be the one to decide what I'll do with it."

The two men faced each other for the moment almost with hostility. Then McManus's face lightened and he held out his hand without a word of apology:

"You'll do, I guess. If the fellow escapes you, he'd deserve to—if he'd killed anybody but Theodore Wing. Whatever I can do to aid, call on me day or night. At the least, keep me posted."

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CHAPTER IV

Trafford Gets an Assurance

TRAFFORD sat in his room in the hotel at Bangor the next evening and studied the copy of Judge Parlin's statement.

"Her brilliancy of mind has carried her far," he said; "has aided her husband politically; and it was this influence that defeated him for the chief justiceship. It's so easy that I can't believe the solution. By George! I wonder if the old judge ever wrote that paper? I wish I'd examined the original more critically. If I'd been one of your inspired detectives, such as you find in novels, I'd probably have caught a forgery the first thing!"

None the less, he put himself to the task of untangling the threads of the statement, with a result that set him to deep thinking. Bangor was not the direction from which had come opposition to the judge's nomination. On the contrary, Judge Parlin had been rather a favourite than otherwise in

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Bangor, and his cause had received substantial aid. But the statement did not assert that Wing's mother had remained in Bangor, or that it was there that she aided her husband politically. The most hostile influence that Judge Parlin had encountered was popularly credited to an ex-Governor, Matthewson, an Eastern Maine man, who at present held no office, but without whose countenance few men ventured even to aspire to office.

"If it should prove that Matthewson's wife is a Bangor woman, 'twould be so easy as to be absurd," Trafford mused. "The old judge wasn't silly enough to believe that what he wrote could conceal her identity. Either he meant it should be known to Wing or Mrs. Parlin, or—but what possible object could there be in forging such a paper?"

Suddenly he sat bolt upright and stared at the document in blank amazement. Then, with a low whistle, he folded it into his pocketbook.

"I'll find Mrs. Matthewson Bangor-born, I'll bet ten cents to a leather button!" he declared.

Whatever had brought Trafford to this sudden conclusion, it proved absolutely correct, and the de-

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tails given of her brilliance and her aid to her husband fitted exactly to the character of the woman. This fact naturally raised the question, was it safe to go farther and, if so, how much farther? Mrs. Matthewson at least had been put on her guard by the published statement, and she was not a woman to remain in ignorance of any steps taken in consequence of that statement, or of the man who took them. The family was powerful and not credited with scrupulosity as to means employed to ends. On the other hand, it was manifest that if there was such an episode in her past, her husband was ignorant of it and she would stop at nothing to keep him so. The secret might be dangerous, but it might be valuable as well.

Beyond this, however, was the joy of the chase, which is absent from no man and least of all from the trained detective. There was a problem to solve, and, danger or no danger, it was as impossible for Trafford to refuse to solve it as to refuse to breathe. Whatever use he was or was not to make of it, he would know the truth.

He was not, however, so intent upon this one

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feature of the case as to neglect Jim Shepard. The second day, he slipped over to Portland and found that young countryman at work and exceedingly homesick in what was, to his narrow experience, a great city. Finding that Trafford knew Millbank, he threw his heart open to him and talked as freely as he would to Oldbeg himself. Trafford let him talk. There was a flood of irrelevant matter, but the detective's experience was too broad for him to decide in advance what might and what might not be valuable. On the whole, however, it was a dreary waste, until he touched on the night he left Millbank.

"I wasn't the only feller," he said; "that nigh missed that train. Jest as 'twas startin', a feller rushed out from behind Pettingill's 'tater storehouse and caught the front end of the car. I thought he was goin' to miss an' I swung back to see him drop off; but he clung like a good one an' finally got his foot on the step. I tell you, he was nigh clean tuckered out when he came into the car, fur he was a swell an' warn't used to using his arms that-a-way."

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