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The Quincunx Case

WILLIAM DENT PITMAN

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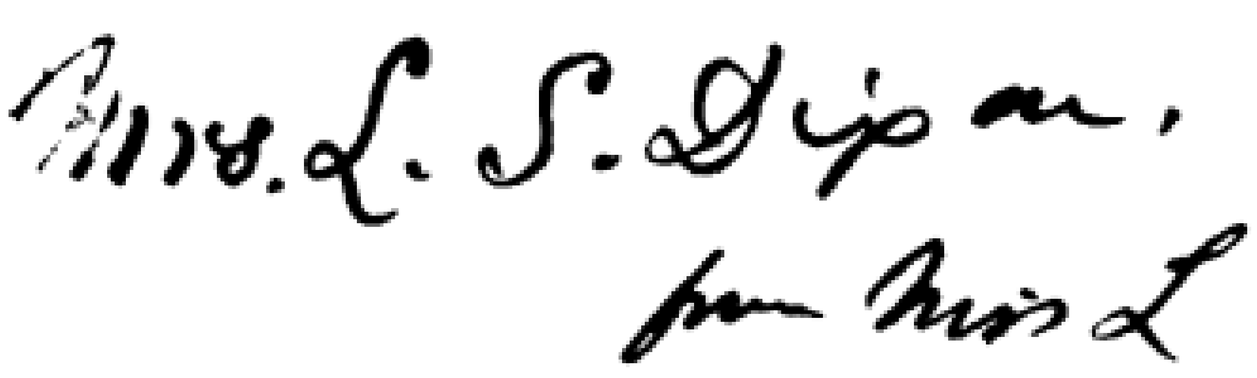

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THE QUINCUNX CASE

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THE QUINCUNX CASE

BY

WILLIAM DENT PITMAN

BOSTON
HERBERT B. TURNER & CO.
1904

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Published September, 1904.

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THE QUINCUNX CASE

"As for the delights, commodities, mysteries, with other concernments of this order, we are unwilling to fly them over—and therefore shall enlarge with additional ampliations."

SIR THOMAS BROWNE: *The Quincunx mystically considered.*

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To H. S. H. Prince Florizel of Bohemia:

My Dear Prince:

It is some years since we talked upon the Quincunx, of number One, number Two, and, more particularly of number Four, and doubtless much of the matter has passed from your mind. For myself I might say the same, were it not that a sprained ankle, a balcony at Castellamare, and a touch of ambition literary, have combined irresistibly to recall them.

I have often made the observation (as no less a man than Goethe before me) that life casts itself spontaneously into drama upon our small whirling planet. Should any one be tempted to deny the romance of actuality, let him turn the following pages in repentance. Surely never man had more whimsical experiences than myself, enjoyed them less at the moment, or more in the retrospection. Once, only, may I say truly, did the prize of honor and gold taste as sweetly in the mouth, as the remembrance of winning it, and that was when I was permitted the honor of bearing you company among the Mediterranean Islands.

'Tis in memory, therefore, of those blue days and fiery nights; of our talk; of your incomparable chef; of your tobacco; and of yourself, suave, inimitable and urbane, that I venture the following narrative. Would it were in that English which you enrich with the accent of Bohemia! Your friend,

Philip Adrian.

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CHAPTER I

BY WAY OF A PROLOGUE

"My suggestion is", she began, eyeing the heap of notes and silver before us on the table, "an automobile hansom to the Waldorf, (we've a moment to stop on the way for a bunch of violets,) and after dinner, an hour or two at the theatre. Then another hansom to—anywhere—for supper ....."

"And after supper?" I queried, with an accent of fine sarcasm.

"Oh, after supper—" she replied bravely, "the linen room at the Institution for Decayed and Indigent Gentlewomen."

"Where they will allow you, I understand, a scuttleful of coal and a baked potato daily?"

"Not potatoes, my dearest boy, rice! Potatoes are too costly for the indigent gentlewomen. But what matter? We'd have had one good time together."

She smiled at me, and I knew of course that she meant it. The occasion was intended to be a serious discussion of our finances, beginning

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by a preliminary skirmish through all my coat pockets, and her dear little purse and chatelaine bag, and the result, in tangible moneys, reached the encouraging total of thirty-one dollars and forty-three cents. Between this sum, and the one at which I had arrived with a pencil on the back of an envelope, there existed the same gulf as once between Dives and Lazarus, and with as little chance for meeting.

"You see," I argued, for she looked distractingly pretty and worried in the lamplight, "the trouble is with you and me. We are much too young, younger, I find, than is customary in New York. This is a difficulty I shall overcome, but you, never! During all our acquaintance you have grown steadily younger."

"Heaven be praised!" cried she, and added with fervent irrelevance, "I should hate so to be a hag, Phil!"

"You will never be, my dear, you couldn't."

"Particularly", she continued, her face clouding, "in view of the truth—"

"You mean because you actually have the seniority by a few years? I am convinced that is a mistake; it never happened. I love you dearly, but you are much younger than I, and must do as I say."

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She laughed. "You absurd boy! Don't I always?"

"No, not always", I replied a little sadly, and there was a pause. She looked at me out of the tail of her eye and then came and put her arms around my neck over the back of my chair.

"Is there such a dreadful difference" she asked, "between what we've spent here and *that?*"

She indicated our personalty with a gesture.

"There is an appalling difference."

"But how did it happen—I thought I was so careful!"

"So did I."

"It is all my fault," she said. "We ought never to have come here at all. But I felt so sure you would get a position!"

"On the contrary, it was I who insisted on it, it is I who have dragged you into this—into the Indigent Gentlewomen."

"How can you say that, Phil?"

We both felt better after these handsome assumptions. Meanwhile Dives, represented by a row of figures on the envelope lay on the floor glaring at Lazarus, sorry and inadequate, on the table. She asked me by and by what

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the figures were, which was self-sacrificing on her part, for she hated calculations.

"We've spent in a month", I answered, indicating Dives, "the stipend of the well-to-do, and we've only got *that*", indicating the $31.43 representing Lazarus, "to pay it with."

"We can't possibly manage it?" she ventured.

"There is a current belief, my dear, that we cannot, but it is founded on mathematics which you do not understand."

She continued to stroke my hair softly, in the way she did when I was tired. "You mean it's the difference between three and six?"

"More like three and twelve." I said gloomily.

"Well, but if so", her face brightened,— "nobody can expect it, you know, and we might just as well have one pleasant evening. Shall I ring for the cab?"

I glared at her, but I knew her to be incorrigible, young as she was.

"You seem to forget, my dear!" I said, "that this is a boarding-house and our week is up to-morrow. That money isn't yours or mine— what there is belongs to the people here."

Perhaps my tone was harsh, at any rate her

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eyes filled with tears. "Oh Phil!" she cried out, "I believe you're sorry we did it! I believe you wish we hadn't come!"

"My dear mother!" I ejaculated, and she stopped, because that is a name I never call her unless I am displeased with her. I was just going to protest with vehemence, when there came a knock at the door.

Although our week was not up till afternoon, and no one knew of the fiscal fiasco but ourselves, yet such is the ugly influence of liability that my heart gave a nervous thump; and I felt reluctant to open the door to a possibly raging landlady. However, I did it, while my mother hastily dried her eyes in a corner, and it was nobody but Peter, the buttons, with a letter.

"And forwarded from home!" was my comment as I gave it to her, and picked up Dives from the floor, with repugnance. But when glancing at the postmark, she called out "Uncle Adrian!"—I went quickly to read it over her shoulder.

"ASHUELOT, N. H., June 1.

"MY DEAR SISTER:

It is some years now since we met, and your son Philip must be of an age when the question of his position in the world is of great impor-

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tance. I have long had it in mind to give him a start and in order to judge of his character and abilities, would like to have him visit us for a month or so this summer. Why should he not start at once? He will find a very quiet household, for I am quite an invalid, and my daughter is good enough to indulge me; but it is the only way in which I can form an opinion of his fitness for a mercantile career. My obligations to his father and pleasant memories of yourself make me anxious to be of service. Hoping to hear favorably from you and from him, I am always affectionately,

JOHN ADRIAN.

P.S. I enclose a check for Philip's expenses."

My mother and I looked at each other, and then in silence took our chairs again.

"Iced obligations and cold storage memory!" I said a little bitterly.

She shook her head in silence, and then rested her chin on her hand. I could see that her thoughts had flown back to the past.

Anyone living in the last quarter century must have heard of the Adrian Leather Works. A large village supplied homes for its workmen, and immense buildings housed its machinery. The man whose signature I had just read was the one whose energy and

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industry had erected that village and those factories—my father's step-brother, a personality as dry as sand. The difference in age between my uncle and my father had been less great than the difference in their temperaments, for Mr. John Adrian had been a man of business through and through; Philip, his brother, only a man of parts. My father's marriage had seemed the culmination of his imprudences to the richer man, whose interest in him, never great, from that point appeared to cease entirely. Fortunately for Philip Adrian, his wife was one of those rare women who make life picturesque with her humor and color. He had talents and tastes, but they were not of the kind for which America pays highly at the present day. She knew his weaknesses, but would not have exchanged them for the virtues of his half-brother. She was the bravest and most devoted of wives, and when he died, although her life might truly have been described as a hard one, she looked upon herself as a woman chosen by fate to have experienced the highest form of happiness.

This was the atmosphere of my boyhood, one of pride and joy and endurance; her humor and her spirit making easy the hardest path.

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We settled in a small town, and she taught music and painting; was loved, and busy and successful, till I was old enough to test fortune also.

We managed during these years to forget all about Uncle Adrian and his enormous wealth. Sometimes his name, or more often his daughter's in the newspaper, recalled to my mother the one visit, which, during her engagement, she had made under his roof. She would repeat once more, with her inimitable mimicry, their conversation on the subject of money, his clumsy effort to warn her, his disgust at her attitude. Then we would laugh together and talk of something else, and certainly she never wondered that this man of large means had forgotten the existence of his brother's wife and child.

Unfortunately for my mother (I use this word though it makes her fiery) her son was very like his father. My education had been good, and I was studious and romantic. Very young, I managed to get pupils, and I taught for five years contentedly, until that fateful day when a leading magazine accepted my short story. The sum we received (for the work was half my mother's) seemed enormous at

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the rate per hour, and I see now that it sent us at once off our heads. I gave up a good pupil in order to work harder, and when a second acceptance followed, became giddy enough to do anything she might propose. We had little economies, we had enterprise, and one fine March day (will it be believed?) we left our satisfactory small home, cut our cables, burnt our boats, and set off for New York, where I was instantly to obtain a salaried literary position. I was twenty-six and romantic, and you have already seen what she was.

Three delightful months followed. The bright city, the shops, the pictures and music, were to her an intoxication; and at no time prudent about money, she grew positively reckless. I visited polite editors, received compliments and vague suggestions; and never dreamed, poor devil, of their smiles behind my back. Our little economies went in vast extravagances, till the latter part of May brought the first doubts and dreads. My mother, who was courageous if not practical, had gone so far as to consult such friends as she had in town, and there seemed a chance that if the worst came to the worst, she might obtain charge of the linen-room at the Indigent Gentlewomen. We

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had jeered at this scornfully enough at the first, but now it began to look imminent for all our jeers.

All this, running through my mind in the pause, set me contemplating her face and the letter in her hand. I felt an instinctive dislike to Uncle Adrian, a repugnance to the visit; and I saw that she, too, was struggling with pride and dislike. But I knew I must go, and I must make her wish it.

So I said, "I wish he had asked you too, dear! The country is exquisite now!" in tones of mingled satisfaction and regret. She looked up quickly.

"You *want* to go? Why, I feared ....." and she broke off.

"Perhaps not altogether,—but he means it well. And have we really any choice?"

"I suppose not", she said wistfully, "but after all these years, I rather hate to begin to take from him now!"

"I know, dear, how you feel—", I was beginning, when my eye caught the folded check lying ignored on the carpet, and I picked it up and showed it to her.

"It makes Dives quite able to look Lazarus in the face," I said cheerfully, watching her

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expression; "and do you know, I really think after all, we shall be able to have our one pleasant evening together!"

And I actually took her to the theatre.

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CHAPTER II.

THE LADY AND THE LITTLE SCRAP OF PAPER

An early sunbeam, entering my room, awoke me, and I lay drowsily awhile, tasting the air with its subtle suggestion of space and height, of forest, and the freshness of the pine. My bed, into which I had tumbled gratefully after my long journey the night before, was a big four-poster, but with a filmy canopy instead of the old-fashioned stuffy curtains. It was high and broad like the room, and both pleased me, as my eye ran over the clean white walls, the bare painted floor, the pieces of old furniture, the smirking portrait in an oval gilt frame over the mantel, the Franklin stove, and the wash-stand service of splendid Chinese porcelain.

The open window framed a mass of green boughs, shot with sunshine and stirred now and again with the notes of a bird. They brought back to me the remembrance of my long drive, after I had alighted at the little railroad station, and left its lamps and noise

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behind. The carryall had jogged on, and I had dozed within it, rousing always to see the mysterious shadows cast by its lantern upon the thickets on either hand, to note that we passed through perpetual forest, the boughs seeming to dissolve as we approached. The woods were full of pleasant sounds, small brooks gurgling through the roots of the rhododendrons, the steady pouring of the summer wind among the trees, and now on one side and now on the other of the road, the shouting of a considerable stream. It had been dim and dreamy for mile after mile, and I had hardly noted that we passed near bulks of building whose chimneys cut the clear starry sky. After this we climbed a long steep hill, turned sharply at the top between high gate-posts, and drew up before a brilliant doorway. It was too dark to see anything of the house, beyond that it was large and square and white, with a pillared portico. I was still half asleep as I gathered my wraps, and stumbled up the steps, instinctively toward the light of cheerful wood-fire in the hall. Not till I had reached it, did I notice the tall young woman who stood in a nearby doorway, and surveyed me.

We shook hands somewhat awkwardly.

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"Is this my cousin Philip?" she said. "I am Cecil."

Her voice was low and clear, and that was my chief impression as I followed her into a sitting-room opening out of the hall. Here were warm crimson walls and high book-cases, another good fire, and on a round table in the centre a little supper was set forth. It was all totally different from what I had anticipated—much simpler, more homelike, more unpretentious. There was no sign of a servant, nothing to ruffle the pride of a poor relation. I must have glanced about with this in mind, for Miss Adrian's next remark had a note of apology.

"My father can never break a habit," she said smiling. "He has gone to bed at ten o'clock for thirty years, and that is the reason he is not here to welcome you." I disclaimed the idea of wishing Uncle Adrian to put himself out, and there fell another pause. My cousin motioned me to the table.

"You must be very hungry and tired," said she. "Won't you help yourself?"

I was not very hungry, but I took the chair she indicated, and as I hoped, she seated herself opposite, resting her arms on the table

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and began to study me under the lamp-light. I was not the person to omit to repay the compliment and for a few moments we exchanged the most reflective scrutiny until a certain humor (also unexpected,) began to glow in my cousin's eye, and at a touch we fell agreeably into laughter.

"Please forgive me," she cried, still laughing, "but you are so ——so different from what I thought!"

"I was about to say the same," I retorted.

"Preconceived ideas," said my cousin, "are very dangerous. When did you get yours?"

"Oh, I've a vivid imagination", I went on giddily, "and the newspapers ....". But here I stopped and again we both laughed.

Miss Adrian, however, soon became grave. "We must be careful," she said, lowering her voice, "or we will wake my father!"

This was the very last thing I desired, so I sunk my own voice to nearly a whisper, and she was obliged to lean her head nearer to hear me.

"You haven't told me how I am different."

"Well you see," she confessed, "I knew you had been tutoring, so I expected a much—much——."

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"Graver pedagogue, with eye-glasses and a dictionary? I'm sorry to disappoint you!"

"But I'm not disappointed——won't you have another glass of wine?"

Her manner changed delightfully into that of the hostess. The supper was delicious, and I began to entertain higher hopes of the pleasures of my visit. On the crimson wall opposite there hung a large old-fashioned mirror, and it reflected, as if framing a picture, the table with the lamp hung low over it, my hostess and myself. My ideas on her appearance had been formed from my knowledge of her father's wealth, and an occasional line from the newspaper. I had fancied a good-humored, bouncing girl in noticeably magnificent clothes, and my first glance had been for a pair of diamond earrings. Instead of this I saw a slender, light-footed, plainly dressed young woman of twenty-three or four. Her pale brown hair was taken back from a heart-shaped face in a way to accentuate that outline. Her eyes, which were blue, or gray, or green, had a mingling of reserve and humor. Her features, if irregular, were full of a certain quality, which my want of knowledge could only denominate character. Her manner was elusively playful, with dignity

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just ready to protest; and there were latent possibilities of spirit and *abandon* about the corners of her mouth, which were there for the undoing of any man who loved power. What she had expected of me,—Heaven alone knew!—but I remember growing critically analytical at my own reflection in the mirror; and deciding that the strong looking young man, with the steady blue eyes and quick smile, had far too much *verve* and gesticulation and general vivacity for the pedagogic rôle. And there was, even then, a subconsciousness that an imaginative, concentrated temperament, a dramatic sense, and a distinct literary bent added still greater unfitness, therefore, that the mirror framed some very pretty possibilities.

Our conversation had been quietly cut short by Cecil's rising to show me to my room, yet it had left me with the desire to continue it on the morrow. All these recollections, and the excitement of such new experiences ran through my mind on awaking and made staying in bed impossible. Six o'clock had not yet struck, but I decided to accept the invitation of the sun to explore my surroundings.

The garden shone with dew, and a hundred early rose bushes perfumed the June air. The

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grounds were not large, but the trees were old and fine, with beds of lilies-of-the-valley and fern planted among them. The house stood high and commanded a view of the purple and golden valley and of the rolling New Hampshire hills. I wandered to the gate, then out upon the high-way, and some yards down the hill, came upon a cross-road. One branch was evidently that which I had taken the night before, for it led steeply down to where I saw buildings, heard the rattle of machinery and noted the veil of smoke. I was in no mood for the factory, so I took the other branch, and lit a cigarette preparing to enjoy myself. A quarter of a mile further on, I came to where a huge oak jutted into an angle of the road. Its roots were mossy and gnarled and formed a natural seat, tempting to the philosopher, which gave a view of the only habitation in sight, a small, old, deserted stone cottage. This was of a shape common in New England, two-storied, with a hipped roof, a tumbledown outhouse attached to one end. A creeper hid the other with a mass of green, relieved against the silver hue of the weather-worn shingles. Among the weeds in the door-yard, a few flowers still bloomed; but the whole place was utterly ruinous and dilapidated.

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The picturesqueness of the building pleased me, although I had a passing wonder that Uncle Adrian allowed such neglect so near his own house. Some purplish flower nodded against the broken window, and chimney-swallows flew briskly about the roof. I drew out my pocket sketch-book and began a rapid outline, whistling as I worked, and with my thoughts hovering pitifully over the loneliness of my little mother left behind. Of course, Uncle Adrian's check had done away with any idea of the Indigent Gentlewomen, but even in her pleasant lodgings I knew she would be shedding a few tears.

Whatever may be the hesitation of the dramatist, life never hesitates to bring together the hour, the circumstance and the man. I know not which of the Olympians had me in hand that morning and led me to the oak-tree, thus making me a witness at an hour when witnesses were unlikely. I had been ten minutes at my sketch when I saw the old station-wagon, the same which had brought me last night, climb slowly up the hill and stop at the gate of the house I was drawing. I recognized the lean, white horse, and rusty leather curtains, and wondered what purpose took it to a place so obviously deserted. The horse backed round

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at the gate like a mechanical toy, and his driver leaned back and held some conversation with the person or persons in the darkened interior: then I saw the door of the wagon open, and the figure of a young woman appeared and jumped lightly to the ground. I was not near enough to distinguish her features, which by the way were hidden in a white veil, but I noticed the pink-and-white freshness of her summer dress, the deeper colored roses on her large hat, and the gleam of something like a jewel at her wrist. She did not pause, but walking rapidly up the cottage path, put a key in the lock, struggled with it a moment, then opening it, disappeared inside. The wagon remained drawn up at such an angle that it was impossible to see if she had been its only occupant. I paused in my sketch, interested to know what took this lady into such a dusty and ruinous place, and kept my eyes on the door until I saw her re-appear. She held her dress daintily high with one hand, and in the other was a sheet of paper, which had certainly not been there before.

I jumped up and moved a pace or two nearer, to see her run back to the wagon, and hand this sheet of paper to someone within. Then with

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her foot on the step, she waited, gesticulating freely meanwhile, though the wind carried her voice away from me. I craned my neck to see the second person alight, but instead saw only a pair of hands flash from the shadow of the vehicle, tear the paper across and across into several pieces and throw them out upon the morning breeze. I saw the white fragments scatter along the road and catch in the grass; there followed some further talk, the lady evidently suggesting a return to the hut, the hands gesticulating angrily in reply; then she mounted the wagon, the door shut upon them and the horse jogged off in the way he had come.

My imagination played fancifully about this incident while I finished my drawing until the tones of a distant bell striking eight o'clock recalled me to my relatives and breakfast. I therefore put away my sketch-book and walked briskly back to the house. Entering the crimson sitting-room where I had been received the night before, I found myself in the presence of Cecil and of a short, gray, elderly man, who could be no other than my Uncle Adrian.

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CHAPTER III

THE FIRST ACCOUNT OF BALSAMO

"Humph, glad to see you!" grunted my uncle, as he shook hands. He gave me a glance over his eye-glasses, and then fell ravenously upon the financial page of the New York Evening Post. I was very willing to turn from him to Cecil, who was full of hospitable enquiries.

"So you've been exploring the country already," she said. "I hope it wasn't because you slept badly?"

"You say that to a man just come from a hall bed-room of a Harlem boarding-house! On the contrary, I waked up from sheer delight and to the sound of the birds."

"And you went out without your breakfast!" she observed.

"Who could think of breakfast on such a golden morning?"

I was trying to make out the real color of her eyes—a tint between green and gray, strange and beautiful—and I really had forgotten Uncle Adrian; so, when he grunted

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again, I jumped, and saw his spectacles fixed on me, above the Post.

"You're like your father, Philip," he remarked.

I mumbled something to suggest that I was complimented by the comparison.

He gave a sour laugh. "Don't suppose for an instant that I consider the resemblance an advantage!" he said amiably, and I saw Cecil's face swept with color at his tone. Breakfast at this point was announced. Uncle Adrian folded up his Post, and with the air of one who has finished his religious exercises for the day, filed it carefully away upon some heaps of the same frivolous literature and marched into the dining-room.

We seated ourselves round a table, upon which was presently placed a huge New England breakfast. I caught myself wondering where on earth in Uncle Adrian's spare, lean frame, he put so much beefsteak and hot cakes, and baked beans and coffee. My Uncle looked at my plate with the strongest disapproval.

"No man ever did a square morning's work on an egg," he commented as I cracked the shell, and this was his only remark during the first half of the meal. However, during my

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conversation with Cecil I caught once or twice his little eye fixed keenly on me, and I do not know why, but the glance had the odd effect of a stimulus. Several times I made Cecil laugh, and I could see by her expression that it was not habitual with her breakfasting.

"So you are one of these lively talkative young fellows," said he suddenly after a long silence. "Well, well, that's like your father, too. Phil always had lots to say, but tongue never filled the till that I could see."

His manner was so markedly ungracious that I could only judge it to be purposely so, and although my face flamed, I held my tongue. His next remark showed me that I was right, for he went on rather more cordially: "You can hang on to yours when you have to, anyhow."

There followed a pause, and during it I met the apologies and entreaties of Cecil's eyes. It was on their account that I spoke again.

"Tell me about that ruined cottage down the road," I said; "it looks as if there might be a story about it."

"You must mean Balsamo's cottage, I think. You are right, it is picturesque. To begin with it's one of the oldest buildings about here."

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"I looked for the date," said I, "while I was sketching the place," and I took out my book to show her the drawing.

"Why, that's capital, Philip!" she cried evidently once more at ease. "The creeper, and the overgrown garden, are charmingly done. But the imaginary girl on the door-step is out-of-place," she added, "for no-one will go near the cottage any more."

"Really?" I cried much interested. "Then I wonder who was the girl I saw go in there this morning?"

The question had altogether disproportionate effect upon both Cecil and her father. He frankly stared at me, and she cried out quick and eagerly:—

"A girl ..... in Balsamo's cottage, this morning? Impossible!"

Briefly as I could I described the whole incident; Uncle Adrian listened with the closest attention and followed with a question.

"You say the pieces of paper this girl had were thrown away, then and there? You are perfectly sure?"

Wondering more and more, I replied that I was. My uncle arose.

"It wouldn't hurt to try," he said as if to

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himself, and then aloud, "Cecil, if you have finished your breakfast, take Philip with you and see if you can find any of those scraps of paper."

"Certainly, Papa."

"There was not much breeze," I said; "they cannot have gone far. But why are you both so interested—what's the mystery?"

My uncle fairly snarled. "Young man this is a matter of business, it isn't a dime novel!" he said roughly, and was about marching away toward his little study when his daughter touched him on the arm.

"You know I don't agree with you, Papa," said she, "I think it is much more than business—the whole affair was so extraordinary. You have no objection to my telling Philip?"

Evidently she took his silence for consent, for she led the way swiftly out on the veranda. Then she turned to me:

"I always forget," she said apologetically, "that what meant to me merely an exciting story, was to Papa a big disappointment, the biggest he ever had. He has been so used to success that he can't bear the idea even now."

I saw her effort, and could not but like her for it.

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"I am to hear the story, am I not?"

"By and by," she answered, "but we must look for those papers first."

We set off together briskly down the road. The sun touching her hair gave its pale coils more life than they seemed to have the night before. The shape of her face and setting of her eyes were fascinating in their irregularity. The night before I had thought her elegant and elusive; here, in her short skirt and active step she was all directness and simplicity, and always dominating these was a sense of strength and reserve.

We walked straight to the tangled weedy growth, where I had seen the unknown throw the scraps of paper; and I confess that when I drew near I repented of my confidence as to finding them again. Most of the fence had rotted down and the grass ran wild into the road. But the earlier breeze had died, the ruined hut seemed absolutely deserted, and we bent at once to our search, parting the weeds and grasses and bending low over the roadside ditch. My cousin found the first piece, and a moment later I held up triumphantly what seemed to be the page of an old note-book all but torn in half.

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"Do you think there are any others?" Cecil asked me.

"I was too far away to tell exactly," I replied, "though she could not have carried many from the ease with which they were torn. Let us look down the road the way the wind was blowing."

"You say there were two people?" she continued, as we walked.

"Yes, but I saw only the hands of the second, and do not know if it was a man or woman—see, isn't that a piece in the ditch?"

It was a quarter of a page, and further on we found a fourth piece. Here, however, our discoveries ended. Although I had certainly seen many more pieces flying to the winds, yet the most careful search failed to find them. So finally, breathless with stooping, we gave it up.

"Don't you think I deserve a reward now?" I begged her. "I have not even asked a question. Here is this comfortable root where I sat this morning, out of the sun. I will sit at your feet, and you shall tell me the story."

She assented, and in the cool shade, she gave me what I have since come to call the first account of Balsamo. Her narrative as here

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set down is copied from my old diary of that time. It is therefore not in Cecil's own words, for she told it on that day rather badly, and was too frequently interrupted by my questions.

Joseph Balsamo, the chemist, came to the Adrian Leather Works through the recommendation of their Boston agent. Nominally, the post was one of chemist temporarily employed for the purpose of testing and investigating some new, foreign leather process. Really, the situation had been offered Balsamo because the agent led Uncle Adrian to believe that he was a man of important and original talent, on the eve of making a discovery likely to revolutionize the treatment of patent leathers.

It is not my purpose, nor is it necessary to go into the question of patent leather processes in these pages. Enough to say that up to this time no such leather could be guaranteed from cracking, owing to the fact that the French method killed the skins, which sooner or later must disintegrate. All processes then in use were variations on this one, and subject to the same disadvantage. The plan on which Balsamo hoped to set to work was one totally new and untried. His experiments were in the nature of a chemical formula producing a sub-

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stance which was flowed on to the leather, whether in skins, or made-up, leaving the leather itself in its originally fresh, elastic condition. Such a process was better and cheaper; and the probable profits, as figured out by Uncle Adrian, were enough to fire even his damp and chilly imagination, and cause him to bear with something very like patience the chemist's eccentricities.

Cecil's description of Balsamo omitted none of his peculiarities. She seemed rather to wonder that one so antagonistic to her father should have yet succeeded in convincing him. Of Balsamo's past history, even of his nationality, very little was known. It was his fancy to claim that he was a direct descendant of the famous Count Cagliostro; but this had been probably inspired by a slight likeness to the portraits of that mysterious personage. He spoke French and Italian better than English, and he had a tremendous outpouring of language in these tongues. When alone he muttered and gesticulated, and notwithstanding his apparent peaceableness, he was a figure to be avoided in the dusk by the nervously inclined. But if at times he acted like a crazy man, at others he seemed more than usually

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sane. When he first came to the Adrian Works he was entirely alone, but later he appears to have produced a wife and daughter—the latter about Cecil's own age. The wife, an equally foreign person, did not inhabit the cottage with him, but settled in the town some ten miles distant, and the little girl vibrated between her two parents. The villagers and work-people pitied the thin, shy, morose creature clinging to her odd father's arm, and were glad when she was sent to a distant convent school.

I should have mentioned here that the arrival of Balsamo and his family took place during Cecil's last year at school; followed by her trip to Europe and appearance in the gay world. When she returned to her home she found her father very tired of being perpetually disappointed by Balsamo, and of his never-ending requests for more money. There had been angry scenes and threats from Uncle Adrian of withdrawing his protection; but oddly enough, he seemed to believe in the man's ability, and to be unwilling to let him go. On his part, the chemist talked wildly, grew more morose and peculiar, was given to vanishing and leaving his laboratory for days at a time, and otherwise tried Mr. Adrian's patience to the full.

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Matters were certainly more strained than Cecil liked. While Balsamo had always been fawningly polite to herself, yet she distrusted his thin-lipped, lined face, and the eyebrows raised on the temples over the smouldering eyes. She begged her father to dismiss the man, but he, although furious at the waste of time and money, seemed certain that Balsamo was nearing an important result.

This was the situation in May, three years back, when Cecil invited a house-party of friends to Ashuelot for the first and last time. Her father, who was always liberal to her, made every effort, got up riding-parties, dinners and dances that must have made his house unwontedly bright. Personally he took little interest in his guests, for he was absorbed in the chemical experiments, every day going to Balsamo's laboratory in the expectation of final and conclusive results, yet every day put off with evasions and further requests for money. Then it was that for the first time he began to doubt the man's good faith. Some-one must have hinted that Balsamo was playing with him, was holding back his discovery, or in secret treating with a rival firm. This suspicion seems to have taken strong hold of Uncle Adrian, and in-

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furiated him. On the day the house-party was to break up with a final dance, there was an unusually violent scene between the two men in Mr. Adrian's study. Cecil, frightened, she knew hardly why, heard it from an adjoining room. Balsamo demanded money. Mr. Adrian positively and finally refused it, and requested the formula of the process in writing according to contract. The other met his request with actual tears, and piteous acknowledgments of failure, but held out great hopes along a new line of experiments to be undertaken so soon as he was supplied with means. Mr. Adrian with another curt refusal rose to end the interview. But the chemist added prayers to his facile tears, asserted his wife's extravagance, her debts, his inability to meet them, and repeated over and over that he was a desperate man. Cecil, trembling in the next room, overheard her father's final "no," and rejoiced at the silence in which Balsamo left the house.

She saw him shamble down the hill, but a sinister impression remained when he had gone.

That night she and her guests danced late. It was well after midnight when a pistol shot rang out from the second floor, followed after an instant of deathly silence, by a second. The

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men precipitated themselves in the direction whence the shots had come, but in the confusion, several minutes passed before they gathered before a bed-room door.

The occupant of this room—M. du Caylus, one of Cecil's intimate friends,—had left the ball-room twenty minutes before, complaining of a headache. He was therefore the only person upon the second floor. You may imagine the excitement of the group who hammered on his door, and their relief to hear his voice within saying—

"I am all right,—wait till I open the door,—there has been a robbery, I think." An instant passed, the key turned in the lock, and the Frenchman, calm and unhurt, appeared on the threshold, holding a lamp and a revolver.

"I wish you to understand, Mr. Adrian," he addressed my uncle, "that I acted wholly in self-defense."

The men fell into the room. On the floor, near the window, lay the body of Balsamo, the chemist. In his pockets were various trifles, a gold cigarette-case, a ring, taken from the room adjoining. Near him on the floor was a revolver, of which a single charge had just exploded.

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M. du Caylus told his story. He had been fatigued, and so gone up early to his room, and slipped on his dressing-gown, intending to read. But the May evening was mild, so instead he drew his chair near the window and sat in the darkness enjoying the perfumed air. He may have dozed, when he suddenly heard a slight noise of steps in the next room to which the door was open—saw a strange man enter silently, and move to the dressing table. Du Caylus sitting in the darkness had remained perfectly still, until he realized that an attempted burglary was taking place. At his exclamation, the robber turned and fired the first shot. His position gave du Caylus an advantage, and he immediately retorted with a second and more effective bullet. The whole affair was so swift and startling that he had remained as if stunned, until he heard the others clamoring outside his door.

My uncle caused the body to be examined. A letter from his wife demanding money, and some bills to a rather large amount, and the cover of a note-book with the pages missing were all that could be found on it except the stolen articles. There was nothing to be done but hush the matter up as far as possible, and

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notify his wife. The most significant incident of all developed when they attempted to do so, for it was found that she had left her lodging, giving no address. Stories were afloat of lights burning that night in Balsamo's cottage, and a woman's shadow at its windows, but nothing more tangible; and later enquiries at the convent where the child had been, proved that the mother had been there and taken her away, leaving no trace.

"Of course, my uncle searched the cottage afterward?" I asked Cecil.

"To very little purpose, I believe. The stove contained a heap of ashes and fragments of burnt paper, among which there were various letter-headings from some of father's largest rivals in the trade. This made him certain that the man had been a double-dealer. And in the cellar were fine skins, and carboys of various substances recently bought, showing he had been really experimenting. But after that, father got disgusted and threw over the whole thing. Of course, the party was broken up, and I was glad enough to have father by himself, for his disappointment was bitter."

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CHAPTER IV

INVESTIGATIONS, AND THE FIRST APPEARANCE OF THE QUINCUNX

The slight air which had stirred about us as Cecil began to speak, had died out into the warm silence of a June mid-day. The kindly oak threw his heavy shade over us, and made purplish shadows under my cousin's eyes. I had followed her with close attention, and yet still felt in the apparently simple course of events the presence of a something unexplained and hidden.

"May I question you a little on one or two points?" I asked her. "There are some things here which I don't fully understand."

"Certainly you may," replied Cecil, and turned her gaze candidly upon me. I looked away, for I wanted to keep a clear head.

"Which room did Balsamo die in?"

"The one you have," was her prompt reply.

"Why then, did M. du Caylus claim he shot Balsamo at the dressing-table, and yet he was found dead near the window? There is the width of the room between them."

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She looked puzzled an instant, then said slowly, "He may have been mistaken—or, could the dying man have staggered there?"

"Hardly. You did not see the body, I suppose?"

She shuddered. "Of course not—and it is not certain what was said. It is over three years ago."

"That's the trouble, it's so far back.—You are sure yourself that it *was* robbery?"

"Why, Philip, the things were found in his pockets! And in the talk with my father that day, you remember he said that he must have money."

I began to strip little pieces of bark from the tree and throw them away.

"Tell me about this M. du Caylus."

She colored, and her voice changed imperceptibly. "He was a friend of mine,—is anything more necessary?"

"Yes," I persisted, "when did you meet? How old was he?"

"We met in New York. He brought letters of introduction to my aunt, Mrs. Culver. He was thirty-five or forty."

"Unmarried?"

"Yes."

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"And you liked him?"

"Immensely."

"Then why did you refuse him?"

She turned her flashing eyes on me. "How did you know?" she cried, and then witheringly, "How did you dare?"

"Please don't be angry," I begged, "I'm taking only an investigator's interest, nothing personal! I simply want to understand the position at that time,—that's all."

Cecil did not look convinced. "I don't see the connection. However, M. du Caylus had never been to the United States before. He was a remarkable man in many ways; most polished and cultivated. I simply did not care for him enough to marry him,—that's all. He *did* ask me, on the very next day before he left. The whole affair distressed him a good deal."

"Then we must eliminate M. du Caylus," I quietly rejoined. There was a pause, which Cecil broke in another tone.

"After all, there is no reason why I should not be frank with you, Philip. I've often wondered why I didn't care. But there seemed something underneath his wit and humor, and taste, and kindness and ability, which I felt, and didn't understand, and didn't like. I can't

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point to any one thing,—it was just a girl's fancy."

"Or a woman's intuition?"

"Perhaps."

We were both silent. In the delight of her confidences and her friendliness, I was in danger of forgetting our lurid little problem.

"And your father gave up all search of any formula which Balsamo may have left?"

"He tried at first, but got no trace. Then he got angry, and said he had lost money enough."

I sighed, commiserating Uncle Adrian on his lack of my own valuable services.

"Suppose we look at those papers, now that I understand."

She put them into my hand. They were torn pages from an ordinary note-book or diary, closely filled with writing in a small foreign hand. Two sheets were torn across, but readable,—the third piece was merely a fragment. They were written in the most astonishing mixture of French and English, the two languages often dovetailing in the same sentence. The following is a translation:

"*Feb. 12th.*

At work all day. In town, saw Marianna.

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From Vettori received $137.52..... $89.75 profit. Gave M. $100.00. No news of Gellatly.
Feb. 15th.

The Gellatly matter looks very dangerous. (l'affaire Gellatly a l'air bien dangereuse.) Vettori is anxious. Latest operation unlikely to succeed.
Feb. 16.

To Marianna $50.00. A letter from my beloved little daughtcr. Vettori will go himself to investigate the Gellatly matter. No reply from Jones Brothers. Vettori says "Pazienza!" From Mr. Adrian $250.00 for laboratory expenses. A good day's work notwithstanding my anxiety.
Feb. 21.

Vettori went to-day. Marianna had a headache, would not see me. Worked later on new batch of skins.
March 20.

Telegram from Vettori, tells of accident to Gellatly. Left at once; arrived Boston just in time. Vettori is much shocked, but also I can see a little relieved in mind. Gellatly speechless, but still living. Hurt in spine; one of the hazards of his profession! Died at 4 a. m. Vettori kindly made all arrangements,

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and we two, with Chavaignac, followed the body to the grave. No family; no relatives to notify, —Pauvre cher vieux! Feel more relieved than for months past, however, and worked most of the night. Mr. Adrian grumbling about money, whereas his millions! His is not the only leather concern he will find.
Mar. 25.

To date—Marianna $150.00 for my little one. From Mr. Adrian $200— Vet. and Cha. $439.19 —I wish it was as good each time."

This ended the two complete pages of what had been evidently the chemist's diary. The fragment that remained was smaller and so badly torn that only a part of the sentences remained. I was struck in examining it, by the appearance, no less than six times repeated, of a cluster of five dots arranged as on a playing card. I give this scrap as it stood.

25.—Mai. Travaillais • ⁝ • Il y à.....
.....Succès. Plusieurs notes • ⁝ •
N'est ce que.....21. Lettre de Jones Frères. Envoyé à Vettori. Il est d'avis qu'il faut finir par là.....27 Mai.
Affaire finie. • ⁝ • à Chavaignac.....
.....No. 3. • ⁝ • à.....
• ⁝ • 2.....

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The paper was of poor quality, thin and old. On the other side, there was the remains of an address, half effaced, and in a different hand.

"*Pierre Chavaignac, 27 Sous-le-fort St.*"

The rest was illegible. I turned this piece of paper over and over in an absorbed silence; by and by Cecil, evidently impatient, looked over my shoulder.

"Look at those little dots—what can they mean?" she asked. "See how often he repeats them!"

I thought of Goethe's journal, (I was always a worshiper of that great man), and the little zodiacal signs he employed to designate special people.

"I think it is a symbol for some person or thing," I told her. "Cecil, could you get the key to that cottage?"

"Easily enough," she answered surprised, "but there's nothing in it, I assure you, except some worthless furniture."

"These pages came from somewhere, and we might find more, who knows? I begin to be very much interested in this affair, and would like to investigate further."

"Do you mean you think there is a chance.....?"

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"I don't mean anything yet. I want to look."

Our eyes encountered; she must have detected a spark of excitement in mine. For I am,—it is my bane and my blessing,—of that temperament, imaginative, concentrated, fiery, which carries on and convinces others before I am myself carried on and convinced. Cecil was a woman and did not ask me for facts, she simply lit her torch at my enthusiasm and swept along with me. At bottom my theories were but nebulous,—my brain busy spinning possibilities for being of use to my uncle in some unexpected way. And governing it all was a deeply literary interest in the story, and a thirst for further details. I've vowed to be truthful in this narrative, so you see on what an underpinning of straw was the fabric erected; and yet, understand this too, a more conventional, experienced man would have been less favored by events.

Cecil undertook to get the key from the gardener, and ten minutes later we stood in the front entry of the cottage. The change was great from the warm, clear sunshine, the life and growth without, to this dusky and ruinous decay, falling plaster making a gray dust, a

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shivering damp rising from the floor and bringing a musty smell to our nostrils.

"Ugh," said Cecil, and raised her skirts with both hands. A charming pair of Colonial ties pirouetted in the patches of sunshine which had come in with us, but I did not even pause to admire them. The ghost of Sherlock Holmes held me in his grip.

I made Cecil name me the rooms. On our right was the parlor, absolutely empty, thick with dust and plaster which no footstep had disturbed. The same description applied to the other rooms on the first floor, kitchen, outhouse and laboratory, though my cousin was evidently dissatisfied with the passing glance I gave them.

"I should have thought this the place to search," she suggested; "that's where father looked."

"Then surely there is no use in our doing so. And moreover, what I want to find out now is where that woman went this morning, and you can see for yourself it was not here."

"Oh!" said Cecil respectfully, and subsided. We came back to the front hall and inspected the stairs. Here were at last traces of passage, the touch of slight fingers on the dusty balus-

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trade, and the swirl made by a skirt on the step.

"But look!" I cried in dismay, "could she have changed her mind and turned back? The mark of her skirt ends at the second step!"

"Because she held it up out of the dirt," remarked Cecil serenely. I drew a breath.

"Man was not born to live alone!" I ejaculated fervently. "Let's go up-stairs."

More finger-marks on the stair-rail guided us to the upper entry, where Cecil triumphantly pointed out to me a neat footprint. This I followed in turn to the doors of the only bedrooms in the cottage. The larger of these was filled with the contents of the laboratory, piled pell-mell upon the floor. The other articles were a large table without drawers, a bureau, whose drawers had been taken out and stood on end, and a rickety washstand. I went to the washstand, because the mysterious foot-print led straight to it; but the foot-print led away again and I found the wash-stand absolutely empty.

There remained the smaller of the two rooms, and nothing looked more unpromising. A couple of beds, taken down, stood against the wall; the mattresses were rolled up in a corner.

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There was a broken chair, an old clock, and a small hanging cabinet of cheap make, suspended from a gas-fixture. The little door of this cabinet stood open, and merely to be thorough, I went across and shook it without any result. But I did not at once hang it up again. The wooden back was splintered and broken, but one of the screws which had been originally used to fasten to the wall still remained. The piece of twine which hung it upon the gas-jet was new and strong. I then replaced it, but I rather wondered why and from where it had been moved. We had finished examining this end of the house, and turned our attention to the little room over the wood-shed, known in New England often as the "cuddy" or "the cud."

However, I found this end of the cottage so ruinous and unsafe that I was obliged to send Cecil down-stairs to wait for me. She went reluctantly enough, and I hastened my survey to rejoin her. The "cud" was hardly larger than a closet. From a trap-door, a rotting ladder led down into the outhouse. There were shelves, and a press painted grey, whose doors stood open. The floor was covered with lumps of plaster, so that I had no longer the foot-prints to guide me.

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I was just turning away, when I saw, protruding above a gaping rent in the plaster, a screw, the fellow to that in the back of the little wooden cabinet; and I realized suddenly that here was where that cabinet had originally hung. I examined the place and found the whole wall surface bathed with moisture, from a leak in the gutter-pipe at the angle of the roof above. This then was the reason the cabinet had been taken down, and this had just come to me, when I noticed sticking to the screw a small fragment of pink stuff. I examined it eagerly,—it was a bit of thin dress goods significantly fresh, crisp, dry and new; my mind instantly recalled the pink-clad figure I had watched that morning and I became convinced that it *was* the cabinet for which she had been searching. But I had found that cabinet empty!

It must have been a flash of inspiration. Cecil was calling me. I was turning the pink shred in my fingers and recalling the whole thing,—the shattered back of the cabinet, the gap in the wall at my side.....and then I went and thrust my hand deep into the hole in the wall, and far down between the clap-boards my fingers met papers. I drew them up and

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at a glance recognized more pages from the chemist's diary.

Cecil called again, but I was tearing the wall out in my excitement; and when I finally joined her, covered with mould and plaster, I had twenty pages or more of Balsamo's note-book.

"From what you told me," I said to her as we locked the door behind us, and stood again in the sunshine, "and what I saw, the thing is almost plain. Evidently she came for these pages of the diary, and went straight to the place where the cabinet used to hang. There she tore her sleeve on the screw. Then she went to the bed-rooms, found the cabinet where we found it, with one or two papers inside, which she took away. But she never thought to look for the rest where they had fallen into the hole in the wall."

"I think you are quite remarkable, Philip," said my cousin, and I was ready to agree.

"Very few women really understand the inductive method," I consoled her.

It was late, and we should have gone straight home, but could not forbear pausing to examine our prize.

And here I underwent mortification from too hasty conclusions. For I saw at a glance the

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justness of my reasoning, and my own foolish triumph, which I ought to have carried a step further. The leak and the resulting dampness, which had been the last link in my chain, had undone me, and the pages which I had recovered were practically illegible.

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CHAPTER V

A CHALLENGE FROM MY UNCLE

Never was a man more crest-fallen than I at this discovery, nor one more entitled, it would seem, to sympathy. And instead of consolation, Cecil gave me only peals of unkindly laughter.

"Oh, it's too delicious,—your expression!" she cried between laughs. "The foiled detective, the complete reasoner in one volume utterly refuted!"

"Was I so pedantic as *that?*" I asked, between my teeth.

"You had been lecturing at me a little, you know!" she remarked cruelly.

"I should have known they would be wet; it was the whole point. Why didn't you say something?"

"So few women understand the inductive method!"

I did not look at her; I knew her eyes were sparkling with the tint of the sun-lit ocean. I walked on furiously, with big strides; she kept

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lightly beside me. As we neared the house gates, I took the bundle of papers and was just about to hurl them into the bushes when she restrained me.

"No, no," she cried more seriously, "don't do that, father may want to see them,—and besides, you don't know if some may be better than others.....And isn't it a good sign that I should tease you on such short acquaintance? One doesn't poke a friend's fire till he has known him seven years."

"I wish you were my friend," I retorted gloomily, stuffing the papers back into my pocket, and slackening my pace.

"But am I not,—a new friend at least?"

"I don't know,—friendship implies equality."

"Now you are childish," she said a little haughtily, but I was in the mood to be indiscreet.

"That is what your father thinks at any rate. Do you suppose he has asked me here except as a poor relation,—one who is not to presume on the invitation? Certainly that is the way I read his manner of this morning."

Cecil was silent for a moment. When she spoke, I was already repenting my ill-humor.

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"My father is not at all well," she said, very quietly, "and pain makes him often rough and brusque in his speech. It means very little, and I thought you understood it. I am quite sure that you will find he treats you always as his kin, and a gentleman."

I met her eyes this time, and found them full of kindness.

"Thank you," I said in the same tone, and a flash of sympathy and understanding passed between us.

"Now," said Cecil gaily, "we will go and tell our great discoveries to Papa!"

I followed her, thinking I had never seen a face more sensitive, a gentler mouth, or deeper, sweeter eyes. We found Uncle Adrian sitting at his desk in the little study; a pipe in his hand, and blue clouds of smoke whirling around his head. He listened in silence to Cecil's lively account of our doings, but when she handed him the papers, flung them impatiently on the table.

"How did you come to find these papers?" he asked presently.

Cecil answered: "Philip reasoned out where they must be, though the mysterious lady of this morning failed to find them."

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Uncle Adrian blew out a fresh curl of smoke.

"And he thinks," Cecil went on eagerly, "that by carefully analyzing these papers we may find some clue to what Balsamo really did."

"Philip has an ardent imagination!" sneered my uncle.

"At least it is worth trying . . . ." I ventured.

"What is worth trying?" he interrupted. "I have spent my last cent on that d....d foreign rascal and cheat, I can tell you that! I believe he deceived me from the first and never made any experiments at all. Patent leather indeed! He knew as much about patent leather processes as he did about bacteriology!"

"But the laboratory, sir, the materials?"

"All a blind, to help him in sticking me. Oh, I was milked," cried Uncle Adrian furiously, "regularly, like a cow."

"But, Uncle, then why did he correspond with Jones Brothers?"

"How do you know he did? Those letterheads I found prove nothing."

"True," I said pointedly, "but in one of those papers which you don't think is worth while to look at, he says he had a letter from them." I handed him the scrap, and he condescended to look at it.

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