THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP SEA

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ELIZABETH JORDAN

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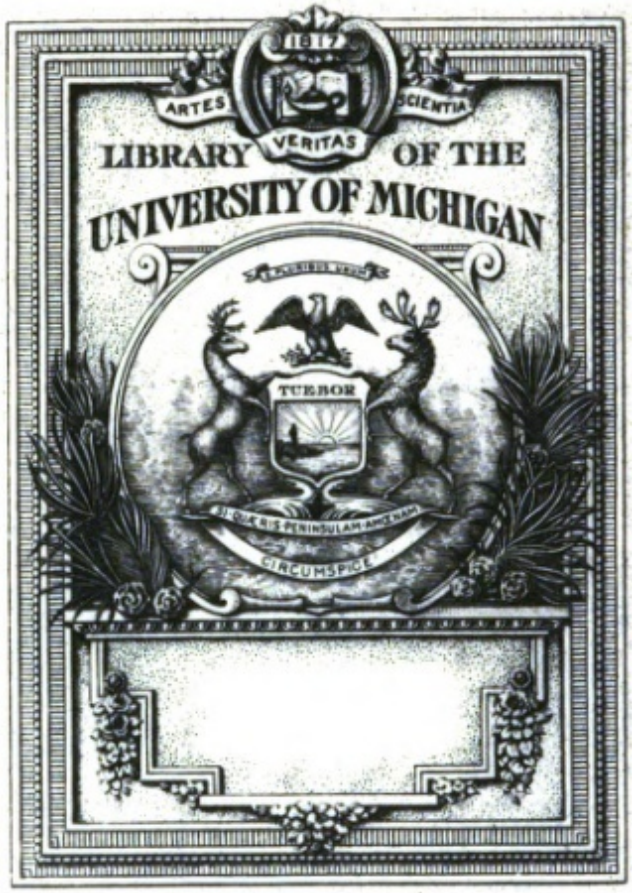

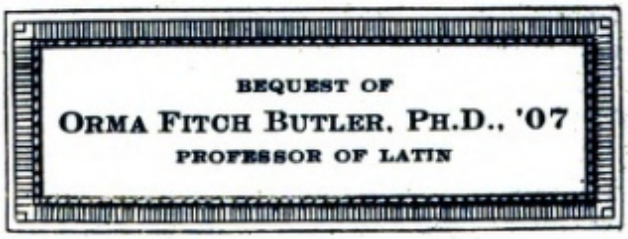

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THE GIRL IN THE MIRROR

MISS NOBODY FROM NOWHERE

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THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP SEA

By ELIZABETH JORDAN

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TO

C. M. L.

FOR MANY YEARS MY FAITHFUL FRIEND
AND SECRETARY

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O. F. BUTLER
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CHAPTER I

A HOUSE OF MOURNING

NICHOLAS LONG returned the subdued greeting of Miss Catherine Chandler's butler, gave the man his hat and overcoat, rubbed his hands—for the November day was cold—and glanced expectantly toward the dining-room at the rear of the wide hall.

"Is any one in there, Johnson?" he asked.

"No, sir." Johnson was already leading the way along the hall, with the air of a man who knew and loved his duty. He escorted the new-comer into the comfortable room, where logs were blazing in a huge fireplace, drew a chair close to the fender, and then busied himself at the sideboard.

Long did not take the chair. He stood by the fire with his face turned toward the servant, and uttered a warning "That's enough, thanks," when a small drink had been poured from the old-fashioned decanter into a waiting glass. Johnson added soda from a round-bottomed bottle, put the glass on a tray, and sedately brought it across to the waiting figure.

Long took a drink, with a wishful eye on the empty chair. He was an ease-loving man and that chair eloquently called to him; but a combined sense of de-

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corum and drama suggested that it was not seemly to be too much at ease in this house of mourning.

"You know how to make a man comfortable, Johnson," he said; and added as the butler obviously lingered, "If Stevens hadn't been with me so long I'd offer you a job, now that Miss Chandler is gone."

"I'd like nothing better, sir," Johnson respectfully assured him. "If I was thinking of a job, that is. You've been coming here so many years and so regular that I know your ways. And there's no gentleman I'd rather serve, if I may say so."

"But you're not looking for another place?"

"No, sir. That is—" Johnson cast a quick glance at the other's face and decided that he could go ahead—"Miss Chandler was good enough to tell me before she died that she had made some provision for me." He stopped, watching the lawyer's expression. No one knew better than Johnson the vagaries and eccentricities of the late Catherine Chandler, and the uncertainties of her conduct. "She did not go into details," he added as the hearer made no comment, "but I gathered that she had left me enough to start a little business, added to what I've saved. I hope she has, sir, for I must say I'm a bit tired of service."

Long nodded sympathetically. Johnson had reason for his weariness. Probably no other man would have tolerated for more than twenty years the tyranny and exactions of the imperious spinster who had lived alone with her servants and had driven those servants with such a heavy hand.

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"I think you won't be disappointed," the lawyer permitted himself to remark, and Johnson exhaled the breath he had been holding. "The funeral is at eleven, I understand," Long went on, setting the empty glass on the mantel and glancing at his watch. "It's just half-past ten. I'll go upstairs and freshen a bit. The same room, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir. You're not stopping over?"

"No. I'm motoring back to Waterford about half-past four. That will allow plenty of time to read the will to the family after luncheon. They're all here, of course."

"Yes, sir. Mrs. Price and her two daughters came out from Waterford as soon as Miss Chandler died, and they've been back and forth ever since. So has Miss Sabin. Mr. Hutchins and Mr. and Miss Dixon didn't get here till this morning. Mrs. Price was quite worked up because no one had been told Miss Chandler was so near the end," Johnson went on. "I'd have been glad enough to have some one here to share the responsibility, but Miss Chandler's orders were strict. Once before, when she had a bad turn, we sent for the family, and she laid us out for it good and proper. And of course her death was unexpected, in a way."

Long rested an elbow on the mantel and stared into the fire. He was a fine type of family lawyer as he stood there—tall, slender, dignified, erect, admirably dressed. He was fifty-eight, but he looked fully ten years younger. His dark hair was graying only at the temples, and his smooth-shaven, benign face and smil-

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ing mouth had a surprising look of youth, sharply contradicted at times by a glance from his gray eyes that was like a blade-thrust. Johnson had never seen that look. There had been nothing in the association of the two men to bring it out. Knowing the visitor had forgotten him, the butler let his eyes rest on the lawyer's thoughtful face. Here was a man, Johnson admiringly reflected, who looked and acted to perfection his rôle in life. It was an ability which Johnson respected more than any other. He had no interest in misers in their garrets, in rich women who dressed badly, in young girls who were not pretty and popular—in any one, in short, who did not play well the part fate had assigned to him or her. Johnson played his own lowly rôle after the manner of the highest type he knew, that of a super English butler under whom he had worked as footman before he entered Miss Chandler's service. There had been hardly a day of his life, since then, when he had not recalled and acted upon some example or precept of this great model.

"She did die rather suddenly at the end," the lawyer now said, musingly.

"Yes, sir, we were all surprised. I understood the last specialists had given her another year or so."

Long nodded.

"But she seemed to know," Johnson went on. "She had the air of getting ready, if I may say so. She stopped seeing visitors after you were here last, three months ago. She only saw the family and the nurses and the brokers, Mr. Jackson and Mr. White, and

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their clerk. They came very often, and she seemed to be attending to a great deal of business. And lately there was one strange gentleman."

Long, who had turned to leave the room, stopped at that. "One stranger? What stranger?"

"I don't know, sir. I'm not even sure of his name. I think it was Sloan. Dark, he was, and clean-shaven and middle-aged. Nice spoken, too, and quite the professional gentleman. But not with your way, sir; more abrupt like."

"When was he here?"

"Last week . . . yes, Friday of last week it was . . . five . . . no, four days before Miss Chandler died. He came just after lunch, and waited in the library while I took a sealed letter up to Miss Chandler," Johnson willingly continued, observing the other's interest. "He told me he'd been telephoned for and was expected. Miss Chandler had him come up, and she sent Miss Webb out of the room, as she always did. You know she never had more than one person at a time in the room with her. Just one of her queer notions, I suppose. Her business talks with you and Mr. Jackson and Mr. White were always private, and sometimes they were very long. So I wasn't surprised when this gentleman stayed two hours. Then he left, and that's the last I've seen of him."

"Was he met at the station?"

"No, sir. He came in a motor. But Miss Chandler's maid, Nora, told me—"

"Never mind that." Johnson, lost in the interest

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of his theme, had forgotten himself, but Long now recalled the dignity of his position. It was one thing to be on friendly terms with Johnson, after years of social and professional visits to the house, and quite another to gossip with the butler about the private affairs of its late mistress. Nor would Johnson, Long knew, have dropped so far below his own ideals save for that taking way of Long's to which he had offered homage. The lawyer smiled at him.

"I've got just time to freshen a bit," he repeated as he crossed the threshold.

But he did not immediately go to his room. He passed the broad central staircase of the house and went on to a door at the right of the main entrance. Instinct had told him that he would find the dead woman beyond that door, and instinct was right. The room was big and cold and dim and flower-filled. It had the effect of a mortuary chapel, and the expression of its occupant, lying on her side in a massive coffin whose sinister outline was hidden with a blanket of red roses, suggested that she did not approve of her environment. Catherine Chandler, with all her faults, had simple and correct taste. She avoided display. This room had been decorated by a hired specialist, and showed it.

Long stood looking down at the dark face of his friend—for she had been his friend, and his best one—noting the sardonic twist of the haughty lips and wondering what final episode or reflection in the sick-room had left it there. He and Johnson were, so far

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as he knew, the only men who in late years had really liked and admired Catherine Chandler; though both had lived through intervals when they neither liked nor admired her. To them she had still shown at sixty flashes of the fire and brilliance she was known to have possessed in her hot youth. She had hosts of acquaintances but no close friends; and he had good reason to believe that most of her servants had disliked her.

As to her nurses, it had been hard to persuade good ones to remain with her during her illness. He recalled now the strained look around the mouth of Miss Webb, the day-nurse he had seen in the sick-room during his final professional visits. Neither Miss Webb nor the night-nurse—a Miss Connolly—had been there more than six months. Poor Catherine had made things terribly hard for them, for herself, for everybody. Now, of all her household and her old circle, which had once been large and gay, there was no one who mourned her—no one, that is, save Johnson and himself.

Yet Johnson, he knew, was making optimistic plans for that new business, while Nicholas Long, in these last minutes with his friend, had merely pulled out a drawer of dusty memories and was critically turning over its contents. He would attend the funeral with decorum. He would eat a hearty luncheon after that funeral. (Johnson and the cook could be trusted to see that the luncheon *was* good.) He would read the will to the waiting, eager heirs, and then he would go back to town and try to forget Catherine. He would

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miss her, of course. A thirty-year habit of close association is not easy to break. He would miss his runs out to dinner, his week-end visits with her. Catherine had never bored him. . . .

As to the reading of the will, that task would be without strain. No one would be disappointed. The unloved sister and nieces and nephews of his client were getting as much as they could expect, and rather more.

"Let them have it," she said wearily, in her final business talk with him, three months before her death. "When I sent for you I had about decided to change the will, but now I won't. After all, they're the children of my four sisters, and they came naturally by their spendthrift habits. I was always the only one in the family with any brains or judgment. Jane and Carrie and Anne all married scoundrels who broke their hearts and squandered their fortunes, and Mary's marriage to Horace Hutchins was just as unfortunate in a different way. He buried her in the country and buried himself in his laboratory, and let her die of neglect when she fell ill.

"When Jane and Carrie were killed in that motor accident a few years ago," she continued thoughtfully, "I wondered at the time, and I've often wondered since, if the thing wasn't intentional. They were both so damnably unhappy. Jane was at the wheel, and it wasn't like them to go off alone together. Harry Sabin's disgrace had just about finished Jane, anyway, and she lived in hourly terror that he'd escape again

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from the penitentiary. He got out eight years ago for a few days, you know. She may have thought Naomi was clever enough to stand on her own feet. But Carrie had those twins of hers to think of. They were only seventeen then. It doesn't seem as if . . . Oh, well, what's the use of thinking about it? I may be all wrong."

Long listened to her wonderingly. He had never seen Catherine Chandler in this mood before.

"If I hadn't been on the other side of the world," she added, "Jane and Carrie might have come to me and told me their troubles. . . . I lost some sleep over that when I got the details. . . . I had just been given my own death sentence, and that cable was the turn of the screw." She stopped, then broke out suddenly: "Nicholas, tell me the truth! Has it ever occurred to you that that accident *wasn't* an accident?"

"Never, Catherine." He spoke positively, marveling over the strangeness of seeing his old friend off on this tack. It wasn't like her to concern herself with memories and regrets. She studied his face, and her own brightened.

"I hope you're right. Anyway, there's no one left now but the youngsters and my sister Anne Price. You can see for yourself what a mess she's made of her life. No brains, either—like all the rest of them, except me."

"The others were all much younger than you," Long somewhat restively pointed out. He had never learned to enjoy Catherine's frequent tributes to herself.

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"Oh, yes, but they wouldn't have gained any sense if they had lived to be a hundred. However, I liked the children when they were babies, and my sister Anne was really adorable at three."

"She's rather charming still," Long suggested.

"She's a spineless jellyfish," Catherine Chandler contemptuously maintained, "and she has devoted her life to spoiling those two brats of hers. They're the most abominably selfish beasts I know of. I wish there were some way I could leave the money to Anne for life and cut them off; but I suppose that wouldn't do."

"Certainly not." The lawyer spoke with such decision that the sick woman uttered a short laugh. "That would ruin all her comfort in the legacy," he added more mildly.

"And I suppose she'd spend most of the income on them, and some of it might even go to that wretch she divorced," Miss Chandler mused aloud. "So let it stand," she added indifferently. "As to Carrie's twins, George will soon gamble away his share and then live on Ethel's. Henry Hutchins will buy a few more first editions and blink over them with his myopic eyes. That's all money will mean in his life. He's like his father. Naomi Sabin—What's she doing now?" she broke off to ask. "I suppose she told me, but I've forgotten."

"She had a little farm and was trying chicken-raising the last I heard," Long reported. "You really ought to have helped that girl more, Catherine."

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"I ought to have helped them all more," his client unexpectedly admitted.

"Especially Naomi. She's the only one of the lot who hasn't had a cent of income beyond what she could earn, and she's shown herself very plucky," the lawyer pointed out. "She's mighty easy to look at, too."

"She's pretty, but I loathe that new type of independent, hard-as-nails American girl," the invalid muttered. "When I said I ought to have helped them more, I wasn't speaking of financial help. I suppose I should have given them some personal attention—shown some personal interest in them. After all, I'm their aunt, the head of their family, and the guardian of Naomi and George and Ethel." She uttered a mirthless cackle. "As a guardian I've been a good joke."

"The intelligent bystander would say you are making it up to them now, in this."

Long tapped with a forefinger the will he was holding.

"Financially, yes. How you men harp on money! I tell you, I'm beginning to think that it isn't enough. I haven't been sleeping well; and when I do drop off, I have the most infernal dreams about those youngsters. Perhaps it's because they all seem queer lately when they come to see me. They act as if they were rather desperate. Perhaps it's just because I'm hipped and I have too much time to think."

"That's it, of course. You're getting morbid."

"I wonder." She was half reclining on a chaise

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longue by the window in her sick-room, while he sat beside her. She did not look at him, but stared down at her still beautiful hands, clasped together on the silk rug that covered her.

"Am I morbid?" she went on. "Or am I perhaps seeing things a little more clearly? There are moments when the selfishness and uselessness of the life I've lived appal me, Nick."

Long stirred restlessly. The dialogue was becoming a strain. He could not reassure her. She had been all she said—and worse.

"I wish I knew more about the lives they live and what sort of natures they really have," she brought out. "I wonder if there's any way I could find out. I don't even know anything about my sister Anne's private life. As a matter of fact, Nicholas, I've never taken enough interest to get more than a surface knowledge of them. But I suppose they're simply morons."

"They are not morons, my friend. They're just reasonably normal and attractive young people—as young people go to-day!"

"'As young people go to-day'!" his friend mocked. "One needn't know that bunch well to realize that they're all going to the devil as fast as they can. But much you care about it, you ease-loving old bachelor. As to attractiveness, there isn't a real charm in the lot of them, if you ask me. The girls are the slang-talking, face-painting, rank-natured individuals of this hideous period, and George is worse. Henry seems merely a white worm."

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She shook off the mood that held her.

"However, they're my kin—unless I've been grossly deceived," she added with her sardonic grin. "So let them have what's coming to them. I suppose they'd go to law if I didn't leave them my money," she ended in a different tone. "I have a horror of suits and legal tangles and gossip about our family. That has always been an obsession of mine, as you know. It was really that scandal about Sabin that exiled me for years. See that there's no more scandal, Nicholas. If they get into trouble, hush it up."

He promised, and he recalled that promise as he looked down at Catherine Chandler's scornful lips. It should be an easy promise to keep. Everything was so simple. Every one would be satisfied. No reason why any of them should get into trouble.

The mortuary chapel was chill and close. He felt a sudden desire to be out of it, to be out of the house, to be motoring back to the city through the cold, crisp air. Even when she was a dying woman, his friend's amazing vitality had permeated her home like an atmosphere. Now the whole place seemed an exhausted receiver. . . . He laid a farewell glance on the dark, cynical face, on the soft white hair that so beautifully and incongruously framed it. For just one moment old memories came to him, like strains of far-away music. Then he sighed depressedly, and left the room. He would not look at Catherine again.

Johnson was waiting in the hall. That was like the good chap. He would be.

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"Another drink, sir, before you go upstairs?" he sympathetically suggested.

But Long shook his head. He was a temperate man and one drink a day was his limit. When he came downstairs twenty minutes later he found the family assembled in the living-room—a sun-filled and cheerful apartment across the hall from the library, and with no suggestion of an exhausted receiver about it. Here, as in the dining-room, an open fire burned, and Catherine Chandler's nieces and nephews were grouped around it in lounging positions from which they only half aroused themselves to greet him. He knew them all and was interested in none, save possibly Naomi Sabin and Mrs. Price.

Even those two he thought of only when they crossed his line of vision. He had listened to stories of George Dixon's gambling and drinking propensities, and he knew of the utter devotion felt for her brother by George's twin sister, Ethel. The Price girls, ultra-modern to their painted finger-tips, he disapproved of almost as much as Catherine had done. He knew they were the types who impulsively open every door of life. They went in for excessive smoking, excessive drinking, all-night cabaret dancing; and he had reason to believe that all their views as to standards of human conduct were what he considered "peculiar."

For Naomi Sabin, dark, slender, really lovely to look upon, but tragic-eyed and smoldering of soul, he had the admiration a normal man feels for beauty and courage. Naomi was alone, and she asked no help

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from any one. She had a definite air of remoteness, as if she arrogantly looked out over life as a mere spectator from the watch-tower of her youth. He knew nothing about her interests aside from the chicken farm, but that look in her eyes showed that she was not happy, and he suspected that she was bitter. Being a kindly man, he hoped the quarter of a million she would now inherit from her aunt might open a new world to her.

The young folks immediately resumed their languid discourse on the general rottenness of existence, which had been so briefly interrupted by his entrance. He sat down beside Mrs. Price, who seemed the only person in the room fully aware of his presence. He was a trifle piqued. He was not used to being ignored. But Mrs. Price made up for the bad manners of the younger generation. She was a charming woman, though, as her sister Catherine had said, a weak one. She had a livid pallor that betrayed ill health, but her manner was surprisingly animated, and she looked at Long with her faded eyes as if his presence filled the room. She talked, however, in a soft and husky voice, on the one topic that seemed to her appropriate.

"Didn't you think dear Catherine looked beautiful?" she asked.

"No," Long candidly admitted, "I didn't."

One of the Price girls—Catherine, he decided it was, and namesake of the dead woman—proved that she had not been really interested in the general conversation.

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She uttered the hard little yelp that was her nearest approach to a laugh.

"That chapel effect they've arranged for Aunt C. C. is simply awful," she threw at Long over her shoulder. "It's just what they'd have done in one of those 'neat, complete and tasty funerals' you see advertised. Mother and Lil and I don't know a thing about arranging flowers for such occasions, so we had to let Wallace and Green do their worst. And all they thought of was to run up a big bill. They'd have banked the old girl in greenbacks if they dared."

"Catherine!" Mrs. Price sighed.

"I could have made a better job of it, and I told you I could," Lily Price snapped. The sisters always disagreed, but they were rarely apart.

"You'd have made it look like a pink tea," Catherine retorted; and Mrs. Price again sighed, "Hush, Catherine." Mrs. Price was always saying, "Hush, Lily," or "Hush, Catherine," but neither of her daughters ever hushed. Catherine went on now, speaking with the high-pitched voice and insolent indifference of her type:

"Aunt C. C. would have loathed it, of course. She really knew what was what, even if she did let her house remain the mid-Victorian horror it was when her father and mother died. But she always dressed beautifully, and her garden is a dream. How the devil she could stand for this stuff gets me," she ended, glancing around the room.

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"That was sentiment, dear," her mother pointed out.

"If it was, it was the only streak of sentiment in Aunt C. C.," Ethel Dixon contributed. "I think it was just laziness. She hated bother. And she was abroad so much, till she got sick, that it didn't seem worth while to do the place over. I suppose after she was sick she thought any place was good enough to die in; and so it is."

"It's nothing of the sort. How can you talk such rot?" George Dixon broke in. "I've put in the odd moments of a misspent life trying to teach you what beauty is, Ethel," he went on discontentedly. "You've had me to look at, too, not to speak of Naomi. Yet with all your advantages you haven't learned a thing. If you expressed your innermost thoughts—which I hope to God you won't do, for they're usually appalling—you'd probably say you thought this was a pretty room."

"Well, it *is* comfortable," Ethel muttered; and George threw up his hands with a groan. He was a fair youth with broad shouders, the closed face of a dreamer, and a really charming smile. His twin sister's bobbed head and fair face strikingly resembled his, but she lacked his sweetness of expression. From the neck up the twins looked like two perfect copies of the same boy.

"One ought to die among beauty," George insisted; "among ravishing beauty. I think I'd like to have you hold my hand, Naomi, when I pass away."

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"There have been times, George, when I'd have loved doing it," Naomi said with a tolerant smile at him, and Catherine Price yelped again.

"Beauty ought to be the last thing to meet the eye," George went on, unperturbed. "How does one know what one's going to strike next?"

Johnson appeared at the door as a majestic intimation that the grief of the mourners was now to be assuaged by the uplift of the services. At the request of their central figure, these services were private. The only persons assembled in the library, in addition to the family procession which filed into it, ending with the lawyer, were the household servants, the two nurses who had cared for Miss Chandler in her last illness, a minister, a quartette from a church Miss Chandler had occasionally visited, and old Doctor Stephen Cary, seventy-three, and family physician to the Chandlers for forty years. He had attended the late Catherine whenever that erratic patient permitted him to do so, which was not often.

"None of you doctors knows anything," she had bitterly remarked during one of his final visits. "I went to half a dozen of you in the first stages of this devilish thing. If you had known anything, some of you might have saved me at that time. If you couldn't help me then, you certainly can't help me now."

Doctor Cary, who was irascible of manner himself, had not taken kindly to such candor. Neither had he pressed his services upon the patient, and he had bluntly informed the two specialists she permitted him to call

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in six weeks before her death, that he was not very familiar with the case. Even at that, old Cary remembered as he passed the coffin and cast a last glance at its tenant, they had given her a year or more. . . .

The hymns sung by the quartette were really beautiful. The faces in the room—some of them very hard—took on a softer look. The minister was tactfully noncommittal in his few remarks. The dead woman had lived a supremely selfish and self-centered life. He could not praise her, but he assumed that her going had left a void in the hearts of his hearers. Behind his back Catherine Price solemnly winked at George Dixon, and George choked and turned red, confirming the minister's conviction.

It was a subdued group, however, that stood around Catherine Chandler's grave a little later and heard the first clods fall into it. There is something in the sight of an open grave, and in the sound of earth falling upon a coffin, which makes for reflection. It brought seriousness even to the faces of the dead woman's nieces and nephews. In that moment most of them laid on her coffin the tribute of a moment's sincere regret. They might have called on her oftener, might have been nicer when they did call. Tears came to George Dixon's eyes. He wished the old girl were still alive, that he might have a chance to treat her better. In the automobile going home he expressed this regret to Lily Price, who administered brisk consolation.

"If she had seen any more of you, she'd have cut you off with fifty cents," Lily suggested. "Even as it

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is, she has probably cut us all off—careful as we were not to get too near her."

The reflection sobered still further the six young faces in the automobile. Mrs. Price and Long and the doctor were returning in another car.

Luncheon was a relief to every one. It was as good as Long had expected it to be, and Johnson, humbly assisted by the parlor-maid, served it to perfection.

"Isn't there a drink in the house?" young Dixon anxiously inquired; but Johnson's prompt negative was as firm as it was respectful. Long was glad his old friend had provided generously for Johnson. He also experienced a fresh regret that he could not avail himself of the services of that incomparable person. Johnson would be a comfort around a man's apartment. Still, Stevens, though he was a little slow, wasn't really bad. Nothing was bad—except the manners and general conduct of the Price girls, who had begun to smoke the moment they sat down at the table and who had already littered the lace centerpiece with cigarette stubs. Long was almost at peace with the world.

His characteristic benignity and charm were much in evidence when, after luncheon, he again faced the expectant group for the reading of Catherine Chandler's will. They were back in the living-room now, with the doors guarded against interruption, and he made the atmosphere as informal as he could. It was difficult. The servants sat in a stiffly expectant row. Even Johnson, who could recall no precedent set by his great model for meeting such an occasion as this, was ob-

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viously ill at ease; and the features of every member of the family were sharpened by a tense expectancy.

Long made short work of preliminaries. He briefly stated that though the writer of the will he was about to read had exacted much from others, she had also shown on occasions a finely generous spirit. This spirit she had again manifested in the making of her last will and testament, and he had every reason to believe that those for whom she had provided would be satisfied with the provisions. He adjusted his reading-glasses on his well-shaped nose and entered upon his task.

The early clauses of the will gave legacies to various charities—a bequest to the local Old Men's Home in memory of the testator's father, and to the local Old Ladies' Home in memory of her mother; funds for beds in various hospitals; a contribution to the minister's pet charity fund which might have made his funeral sermon more eloquent had he known of it in time; various scholarships in a near-by college in memory of the testator herself.

Next the servants were provided for. Six thousand dollars to her faithful butler, Emory Johnson, who had been in her service for almost a quarter of a century. Four thousand to her cook, Elizabeth Jenks, who had been with her for twenty years. Two thousand to her personal maid, Nora Smith, who had been with her for nine years, and who, though she had borne with fortitude the blow of her mistress's death, now gulped emotionally as the legacy was mentioned.

"She also gave me," Long stopped to interpolate,

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"though she does not provide for them in her will, a special gift of five hundred dollars for each of the two nurses who attended her at the time of her death. Very generous provisions, all these," he thoughtfully repeated, taking off his glasses to wipe them with a spotless handkerchief he unfolded for the purpose; "very generous indeed."

Judging by the shining faces in the servants' row, the opinion was shared. Long readjusted the glasses and went on:

"The provisions for the family of the late Miss Chandler are on a relatively generous scale, and I think you will appreciate the fact that they are hampered by no conditions."

He read aloud, solemnly:

"To my sister, Anne Chandler Price, I give and bequeath five hundred thousand dollars. I make no special provisions for her two daughters, knowing that, following the dictates of her generous nature, she will share her income with them and that the principal will revert to them at her death.

"To my niece, Naomi Sabin, I give and bequeath two hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

A slight gasp came from Naomi Sabin. Long glanced up, surprised by her lack of self-control, but she sat silent now, with downcast eyes. He read on:

"To my niece, Ethel Dixon, the same amount. To my nephews, George Dixon and Henry Hutchins, I give and

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bequeath one hundred thousand dollars each. Being men, they should be able to make more money if they desire it."

A ripple passed over the small audience—a ripple of quiet amusement, proving that the gathering was now in a mood to take a joke. The lawyer smiled and continued the reading. There were further directions and provisions which did not affect the principal legacies. At the end he laid down the document and beamed on the alert assemblage.

"It isn't often," he told his audience, "that one has the pleasure of reading a will which is so sane, so balanced, and so satisfactory to the majority of the heirs."

He stopped in surprise. He had been conscious of the unobtrusive departure, from the room, of the admirable Johnson. He now became aware of that servitor's return. Johnson, indeed, was standing directly in front of him, presenting a note on a tray.

"I beg pardon, sir," he murmured, "but Miss Webb assures me that this matter is urgent." He added humbly, as Long gave him for the first time one of the sudden eye-thrusts for which he was famous in legal circles: "I understand it has to do with final orders from Miss Chandler herself. Otherwise I could not have allowed myself this interruption."

Long took the note from the tray and with a murmured apology to his audience opened it, still frowning. Its contents did not clear his brow. Instead they

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gave him a definite sense of uneasiness. He read and re-read the note:

MY DEAR MR. LONG:

Following the instructions of the late Miss Chandler, I am asking you to come to me in the library *after* the reading of the will—but not till it is finished—to receive certain documents from her.

It is also her wish that the heirs—with the exception of the servants—shall remain where they are till you return to them.

Sincerely yours,
HOPE WEBB.

Long's glance swept over the group before him. Its members were silent and watchful now, as if they, too, realized that only an important message would have been permitted to interrupt the proceedings. In the interval before he spoke the lawyer's brain did some quick work. Should he slip out of the room with merely a murmured excuse for a few moments' absence? The note might mean anything or nothing. As representing Catherine Chandler, whose nature was erratic and whose impulses were sudden, it might mean a great deal. It would be well, he decided, to give those before him a hint of the nature of his call. It might prepare them—but the rest of the thought was absurd. He banished it and smiled at the serious faces, which smiled back with quick relief.

"I'm told in this note," he cheerfully announced,

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"that Miss Chandler left some final instructions which are to be given to me now. She evidently meant the family to hear them, for I am to ask you to stay here till I get back. That ought to be in about five minutes. The servants may leave now."

He added the last sentence from the threshold as he left the room. The servants, in a decorous line headed by Johnson, followed him into the hall. Reassured by Long's manner, those who remained immediately began to talk. As the living-room door closed, Long heard the sudden upgush of speech, with Ethel Dixon's clear voice dominating. Most young folks, he had observed, spoke far too loudly nowadays.

"Never mind, Georgie darling," she was saying. "You can have half of mine. And won't it be simply wonderful . . ."

He went into the library, where only a few hours before its mistress had lain in what the undertaker had described as "state." Now the center of the big room was empty and the extra chairs in it had been pushed back against the walls. The funeral flowers were still there, and their increasingly heavy odor greeted him as he crossed the threshold. He closed the door behind him and cast a rather inquisitorial glance at the waiting nurse who rose to meet him.

He remembered Miss Webb as the tight-lipped, sometimes resentful-eyed, but handsome young woman he had seen in the invalid's room during the last six months of his client's life. She had fine features and a

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complexion of the pleasing texture that goes with auburn hair and brown eyes. She was still in her immaculate white uniform, but she was no longer tight-lipped and resentful. Her face bore evidence of grief—the only such evidence he had seen that day. Her manner was nicely keyed to the quiet harmonies of a house of mourning. She was not in awe of lawyers or of any one else. She was merely performing a task that lay somewhat outside her province.

"I'm afraid you will think this is a nuisance, Mr. Long," she said, professionally. "But Miss Chandler's instructions to me were very clear. Johnson was to let me know as soon as you finished reading the will, out there. Then I was to send for you and give you this."

She handed him a long envelop which he opened at once. It held two inclosures—a second long envelop, smaller than the first, and a letter. The long envelop bore a sentence which leaped up to meet his eyes: "Not to be opened. Await later instructions." The letter's envelop bore the line: "To be opened after reading the will."

He raised his eyes and met those of Miss Webb. She spoke as if she had read his thoughts.

"I'm afraid it's something unpleasant," she said in a low voice.

"What makes you think that?"

Absently but methodically Long had put the larger envelop into an inside pocket of his coat and inserted

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a firm forefinger under the flap of the envelop containing the letter he was to read. Her words checked the action:

"Several things. Among them, her expression when she gave me the instructions." As the hearer's eyebrows rose, Miss Webb hurried on, with her first evidence of nervousness: "It was the look she always wore when she was going to do something unexpected. A sort of grim 'Make-the-best-of-this' attitude. Probably you know it. You have seen it."

Long nodded. He had seen it often enough. He walked to the door, opened it, and held it ajar for Miss Webb.

"Thank you very much," he said, and with an effort threw in his best smile. "There was nothing else, was there?"

The nurse accepted her dismissal and moved across the threshold.

"Nothing at present," she said. She stopped on the other side of the door and looked up at him. He again observed her obvious depression, and now he saw the telltale redness of her eyes. "But there's another matter I'd like to talk over with you before you leave the house," she added. "Can you spare the time?"

Long thought he understood. Probably she had heard of that five-hundred-dollar gift. Possibly Miss Chandler had told her of it as she had told Johnson of his legacy.

"I'm due in town for an early dinner," he said,

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"and it's almost four now. But probably you won't need more than a few minutes?"

The last sentence was a question and Miss Webb answered it as such.

"I'll let you judge of that," she said quietly, as she left him.

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CHAPTER II

LONG HAS A SHOCK

LEFT alone, Long noiselessly turned the key in the lock of the door and sat down in the nearest chair. For some reason which would have been hard to explain, he could not have opened that letter under the eyes of Miss Hope Webb. He inwardly admitted that he dreaded opening it now. He completed the finger-thrust and drew out many sheets of thin paper, dated four days before Catherine Chandler's death and filled with her cramped but clear script.

MY DEAR OLD FRIEND [he read]:

It's a shabby trick I'm playing you—or at least you will think it is. It isn't, really. True, I've made another will, and I've made it through another lawyer, and I've had it witnessed by Miss Webb and the new parlor-maid. You won't approve of the action nor of the will. I have also evolved a certain policy and written out certain instructions and conditions to be followed by my expectant heirs. You won't approve of these either. But you will continue to act for me just the same. The man Sloan, of Stanton, Harding and Sloan, understands that his interest in my affairs began and ended with the drawing of the new document. It is for you, as executor and trustee, to see that its provisions are carried out. I had to have some one else draw it, because I wasn't up to the fierce debate you

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would have started if I had called you in. You are very opinionated, Nicholas, and you sometimes talk too much!

All these changes I am making have come as a result of my talk with you three months ago, the last time we discussed my will. I became obsessed by the idea that I must know more about my family than I did. I took measures to learn more; and God knows I've found out more than I bargained for!

I've learned many things; horrible things some of them, things they do not dream that any one suspects. They are in some ways infinitely worse than I thought them; in some ways better. I can't feel that they are beyond hope. And—you will smile at this, Nicholas, if you are not too furious at the moment to smile at anything—I not only have a wish to help them, but a conviction that I can do it. To leave them a lot of money now, with authority over it, would be to complete their destruction.

They have got themselves into an appalling impasse. Perhaps from my grave I can do more for them than I ever did in life. At least I must try, though I realize that I have very little time. You must help me. You will be able to relieve Namoi of her burden, and to handle the matter of Anne and Lily, and to take up other issues as they appear. I shall let you discover the conditions for yourself. I want you to approach the whole question without prejudice and with an open mind.

I let you read the original will to them because I wanted them to know what they'd have had if they had run straight. They will know better than you do why I have changed that will. I shall seem heartless and cruel, but that will not surprise them. They will understand it only too well.

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I have experimented with them, and in that, too, I was cruel. But I had to know what they were at heart. I reproach myself and I've paid heavily. My experiment has been a boomerang. It has got on my nerves. But at least I can be sport enough to stand by my guns. Anything that happens is up to me and not to them—not to any of them. Remember that, Nicholas.

Go back now and read my decision and conditions to them. You won't be as bland and pink and smiling after you've done it as you undoubtedly were when you read the will. You're getting indolent, old friend, and you like the easy, pleasant way. The new conditions will make you work a bit—will shake you out of your pleasant routine. That will be good for you, and of course you'll be paid for it. I haven't lived sixty years without realizing that I can't ask service from any one, even from such a friend as you are, without paying for it. So I will pay, and pay well—as you will see.

The new will is not to be opened at once. Later you will receive some special instructions about it. In the meantime you will draw on the proceeds of those bonds which I forced you to sell. You will remember that I also made you credit the price to your own account, to await further instructions. You will draw on that fund for the expenses of the estate until further notice.

Let me add, dear Nicholas, that I am sure you will faithfully carry out all my instructions and requests, however you may deplore them. For in a world sadly deficient in loyalty and friendship I have never yet found you wanting.

CATHERINE CHANDLER.

P. S. Work with Miss Webb. She understands a good

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deal. I wish I'd had the nerve to talk all this over with you, but my courage is gone! I shall not outlive it very long.

There were more sheets. No doubt they contained the plan and instructions to be read.

Long laid the letter on a chair beside him, took out his handkerchief, and wiped his handsome, wholesome face. There had been a time, many years ago, when he had almost asked Catherine Chandler to marry him. Since then he had frequently congratulated himself on not having done so. He now congratulated himself again. He took up the remaining sheets and deliberately read them. At the end of the reading his face was very stern. He re-folded the pages, slipped them into the envelop which he retrieved from the floor, and after a few moments of reflection slowly made his way back to the living-room.

There the formal ranks of the earlier meeting had broken up. Mrs. Price, her worn face for once flushed with excitement, was in a big chair by the fire, a daughter perched on each broad arm of it. George and Ethel Dixon sat side by side on the floor, facing the flames, while Henry Hutchins, looking for once almost animated, stood with his back to them, an elbow on the mantel, talking to Naomi Sabin, who listened from her place in a deep wing-chair. Young Dixon, who had been splashing conversation over the rest with his usual inconsequence, alone heard the lawyer reënter. He greeted him buoyantly.

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"Welcome back to your Sunday-school class, dear teacher," he called out. "Observe that we're smiling from east to west." He grinned exaggeratedly. "For weeks we've only smiled from north to south, like this." He curved his lips downward in a sanctimonious burlesque. "In short, we're behaving pretty well when you remember that the present impulse of our untamed natures is to dance a cancan. But that wouldn't be pretty, would it?"

"No; and it would be a little premature." Long approached them slowly, glad that George had given him so good a cue.

Naomi Sabin was the only one in the group who grasped the significance of his reply.

"Premature?" she quoted. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean—" Long spoke heavily, but he had decided to let them have it straight—"I mean that another document has just been handed to me. The will read to you has been in existence for several years, and was again formally approved by Miss Chandler only three months ago. Naturally I had every reason to assume that it represented her final wishes. But it appears that last week Miss Chandler made another will." He watched the color drain from the faces of Mrs. Price and Naomi Sabin, and took in the stupefied, incredulous stare of the rest. "I'm afraid you may find it disappointing," he ended. "But we shall not know its financial provisions for some time."

For a moment a deep silence hung over the room.

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Then Naomi spoke, her tragic eyes on the whispering fire.

"I'm not surprised," she said dully. "I didn't really expect anything . . . good . . . from Aunt Catherine."

The voice of Mrs. Price rose above Naomi's, and Long, as he turned to her, was shocked by the stretched, gray look of her skin as she cried, "It can't be . . . you don't mean . . ." through colorless lips, and then burst into sudden, hysterical weeping. Neither of her daughters offered her comfort. They sat very still on the arms of the chair, staring into the fire, their hard young faces wearing new masks of sullenness.

Henry Hutchins laughed on two short notes.

"Why did she do it that way?" he asked the lawyer. "Why did she rouse our hopes? Had you no suspicion at all of a second will?"

"None at all." Long was glad to have that assurance underlined. "She called in another lawyer, only last week, as I told you, and without my knowledge. As to why she did it—" an irrepressible sigh broke from him—"your aunt had her own way of doing things. But she said you would all understand this action better than I should."

"I'll tell the world I understand it," George Dixon muttered. He added under his breath, "I know why she let me out, all right, all right."

Long reflected that they all knew that. Naomi spoke again, with a break in her voice. She seemed to be making a strong effort at self-control:

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"Do you know anything about the provisions of this second will, Mr. Long?"

"Very little. As I've said, it's not to be opened at once. I'm to have instructions later. But there's a definite plan to be followed in the interval. I am to put that before you and to see that it's carried out."

"Then why not let us have the plan?"

Naomi had the brains of the group, the lawyer decided. Moreover, she was getting herself in hand. Every remark she made had been to the point, and now she had the air of deliberately coming to his assistance.

"I will read it at once," he said, with a grateful glance at her.

The second document began with a concise statement that the bequests to charities and to the servants, made in the first will, were repeated in the second with slight modifications, which were mentioned. Johnson would be relieved, Long reflected. No doubt Johnson had been disturbed, feeling something unexpected in the atmosphere. The lawyer raised his eyes from the closely written pages and looked around the motionless semicircle.

"I think I'll just give you the gist of the rest of this," he said, his agreeable voice hardening a trifle under the strain of his task. "I am given considerable latitude, it appears, and I rather think it will be easier for you to have, first of all, a brief summary of Miss Chandler's general plan. We'll have plenty of time to go into details later."

He talked for five minutes, but he did not look at

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individuals as he spoke. He had cast one glance at the leaden, desperate face of Mrs. Price, who was quiet again but sat crouching forward, staring before her with unseeing eyes. He had taken in, in that same glance, the suddenly old look on the face of Naomi, and the despair of the Dixons. Those revelations were enough. Both the Prices and the Dixons, he knew, were at the end of their financial tether. Mrs. Price had been drawing on her small capital for years. George Dixon had long since squandered the patrimony their mother had left the twins, and had been borrowing heavily at ruinous rates of interest on his "expectations." The new plan spelled nothing short of tragedy to the Prices and Dixons.

As he approached the end of his résumé, however, he found courage for another eye-flash at Naomi. She was still in the wing-chair, her silk-clad legs crossed and showing to the knees, her bobbed black head with its shining high lights resting against the chair's high back. Her dark, lovely face wore a look of smoldering intensity. Her blue eyes, the bluest eyes Long had ever seen, were fixed on the blazing logs. But there was no detachment in her easeful pose. He knew that she was following every word with strained attention.

Coming down to brass tacks, he ended, what the plan meant was that they were all to be on some sort of probation for six months, during which time they would receive nothing from the estate. However, they would be under no expense for shelter or food. They were to spend that interval in Miss Chandler's home,

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as her guests. Any of them who refused to live in the house during the stipulated period, or who, having consented to do so, should be absent from it or break its rules, automatically yielded by such absence or conduct his or her claims to any future benefit.

"This indicates that the new will provides for you in some degree at least," the lawyer interpolated, and went on to outline the conditions. The table would be supplied on a scale suited to a family of nine, but for any entertaining individuals wished to do they themselves must pay. No tobacco or liquor would be allowed the family during the period of probation.

"Why, the old whited sepulcher!" George Dixon cried, startled out of his usual calm. "She smoked, herself, like a chimney! I've seen her at it, every time I came here."

"The clause means," Long patiently explained, "that the household budget will not include allowance for these things. It does not forbid them to those who can afford to buy them as individuals, from their private purses."

"I'll spend all I've got on 'em," George cheerfully announced, and Naomi turned on him an enigmatic glance. "I don't know any place where one would need 'em more than in this family tomb," he sulkily observed in response to her look.

"Mr. Long, what does she mean by the family of nine?" Catherine Price asked. "There are only seven of us."

"That appears to be the little joker in the pack,"

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the lawyer dryly explained. "Miss Chandler has been kind enough to include Miss Webb and me in her plans for the coming six months. She also includes herself. The chair at the head of the table will always be vacant, to represent Miss Chandler's unseen presence among us."

"God!" said George Dixon. "That'll be a cheery situation!"

Long cast a swift glance around the assemblage, and was interested in the various reactions to his announcement. Mrs. Price's colorless face turned grayer. Naomi Sabin smiled a twisted smile. The rest of the group dropped their eyes, showing no emotion, till Henry Hutchins broke a long moment of silence.

"I can understand perfectly why she has included you, sir," he said, neatly avoiding the issue of the hostess's empty chair. "You're evidently to be our judge and jury, as it were; and I think we all realize that we couldn't have a fairer one, or one we'd be more willing to live in the same house with."

"Thank you, Henry," Mr. Long said gravely.

"But what I can't see," Hutchins amplified, "is why Miss Webb is in on this. By all the rules, she's a rank outsider. And though she stood by for six months, on salary, it seemed plain enough that there was no love lost between her and Aunt C. C."

"I don't quite understand that, myself," Long admitted. "But, for that matter, it's hard to understand the whole affair, and there certainly are details of it—"

"Such as some one of us going alone to Aunt C. C.'s

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room every night during the first week we're here, and sitting there for half an hour," Catherine ironically murmured.

Mrs. Price sprang to her feet.

"The whole thing is terrible," she cried, with the note of hysteria in her voice which had been there when she last spoke. "It's a monstrous joke she's playing on us, and I, for one, won't stand it!"

"Sit down, Mother. Don't let her get your goat," Lily Price coolly advised. "She'd enjoy doing that, even from her grave."

"I can't tell you what my late client's object was," Long repeated. "She was sure you would all understand without telling. And certainly I think you realize that she didn't see fit to take me fully into her confidence. But in the course of my thirty years of professional relations and friendship with Miss Chandler I discovered that, however erratic her actions seemed at times, she usually had sound reasons for them. I don't know why Miss Webb is in this. Perhaps she herself doesn't know. But you can safely assume that Miss Chandler was very sure of herself and her object when she made a new will and all these plans, and as we go on we shall understand them better. The sensible thing to do in the meantime is to take a cheerful view of the matter.

"We're going to be somewhat inconvenienced, I fear," he added with an irrepressible sigh. He had never realized until this moment how much he had enjoyed the peaceful separateness of the unmarried.

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"It will be hard for me to leave my bachelor quarters, where I've been pretty comfortable for fifteen years. For a few moments I felt that I couldn't do it. And Miss Chandler didn't give us much time to turn around. She wants us all here within a week. Fortunately, the house is big, so we needn't be under one another's feet. Miss Chandler's own room, I see, is to be left unoccupied, as well as the store-room on the floor above it. Aside from those two rooms, we can spread ourselves as we please. The present household staff will remain, and, as you know, it's excellent. I dare say we'll be very comfortable," he bravely ended. "After all, it's only for six months. Let's consider it a country-house visit and a new experience."

"I suppose there's no way of breaking that second will—of proving undue influence or unsound mental powers or anything of the kind?" Catherine Price suggested.

"No. Miss Chandler has provided against that. Any one who starts an action loses out all along the line."

"Then wouldn't it be a good idea to make the best of things?" Catherine abruptly brought out. "As we're all together now, why don't we go over the house and select our quarters?"

"That would be an excellent plan."

Long rose, thinking better of Catherine Price; and the others, slightly intrigued by the prospect of "prowling through the mausoleum," as George expressed it, followed his example. Long summoned Johnson, and,

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when the butler came, addressed him cheerfully. He had recovered his poise. Despite thirty years in the law, Nicholas Long was still an optimist. No doubt everything would work out all right. This was merely one of Catherine's eccentric notions. He didn't attach much importance to her discoveries. Of course any discoveries she had made about the Dixons and the Price girls would be startling to her.

"Johnson," he said, "I suppose you've heard that there are to be some radical changes around here."

"I had suspected as much, sir." Johnson's voice shook a trifle. The great Briggs had given him no blue-print for such a moment as this.

"Don't be disturbed. You'll get your legacy; in fact, you are to have seven thousand dollars instead of six."

"That's very gratifying, sir." Johnson was relieved but dazed.

"There's a little string to it," Long went on. "You're to stay on in Miss Chandler's service another half-year, and we're all to live here. We're still to look on Miss Chandler as the head of the family, and we're not to forget that she is our hostess."

Johnson was now sure that the whole thing was a hoax. His plump body had a collapsing look.

"All to live here, sir?" he faltered, and tried to smile at the joke.

"Yes. It's one of Miss Chandler's original ideas. She had a lot of them, you know. We must make the

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best of this one. We're going to select our new quarters right now. Have you time to go over the house with us?"

"Certainly, sir." Johnson was reassured. If this was a dream, it was a realistic one. Mr. Long's manner had never been more convincing.

"All right then, lead the way. I suppose the general idea," Long added as the entire party left the room, "is to give the ladies their choice of the quarters on the second floor, while we bachelors camp out on the third."

"Yes, sir. Do I understand, sir, that you yourself are to be with us?"

"Yes, and Miss Webb, too."

Johnson led the way with buoyant steps. He was to have seven thousand dollars at the end of six months. The new business could wait. Meantime Mr. Long, whom he greatly admired, would doubtless be the head of the house. That was a little bit of all right.

"Would you care to see the late Miss Chandler's rooms first, sir?" he asked as the procession reached the upper landing.

"We'll have a look at them. But we must not refer to her as 'the late Miss Chandler.' She's supposed to be still among us. No one will use the room where she died. It's to be left just as it is; but kept in perfect order, of course, as if she were occupying it."

"Certainly, sir."

Johnson threw open a door at the right of the front hall, and Catherine Chandler's guests crowded about

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the threshold. The room was large and sun-filled, and its two front windows faced a wide lawn, while its side windows overlooked a really beautiful garden. The room's furniture, like that of the rest of the house, was of the perdurable mid-Victorian type. The huge bed in which its owner had exhaled her last sigh raised its carved walnut headboard almost to the ceiling. The walnut bureau and dressing-case had marble tops. A rather faded Brussels carpet covered the floor. Three incongruous notes were furnished by a superb Chinese chair with a throne back, a startlingly new phonograph, and a chaise longue, the latter gay with chintz and cushions and standing by the wide side window.

The chaise longue had been the sick woman's favorite resting-place during her illness, and each member of the present company had seen her in it many times. All eyes went to it now, as if expecting to see the long, gaunt figure, the dark, handsome, sardonic face, the hard, brilliant eyes of its late occupant. They appeared to be there. For a moment at least Catherine Chandler's guests had a heart-shaking sense of the actual presence of their hostess. Mrs. Price shrank back from the door. Ethel Dixon's hand reached out and caught her brother's arm.

"If she's here, she's gloating over us all," Lily Price muttered; and she added dispassionately, "Damn her!"

"Lily! How dare you!"

The words burst from Mrs. Price's lips in a shriek, and for once Lily Price looked self-conscious.

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"I suppose I oughtn't to have said it," she muttered. "Just the same, she's played us a rotten trick; and if she's where she knows about it, I'll bet she's glad she did it."

"That'll be about all from you, Lil," Catherine Price said evenly. "See what you're doing to Mother!"

Long saw the eyes of the two girls meet and hold. Then Lily shrugged her thin shoulders with a gesture of surrender and was silent. Mrs. Price, obviously struggling for self-control, moved away from the rest and across the hall. The lawyer was interested in that brief eye-duel between the sisters. He knew now that Catherine Price was the ruling spirit of her family.

Off Miss Chandler's chamber was a good-sized dressing-room, used for the past two years as a bedroom for nurses, and between the two rooms was a large bathroom, with up-to-date tub and equipment.

"I suppose Miss Webb will prefer to keep the dressing-room and bathroom," Long mused aloud as his eye took in these details. "She's used to them, and I see there's an exit into the hall from the dressing-room. The connecting door into Miss Chandler's room could be kept locked."

"Very well, sir."

Johnson accepted the suggestions as an order, and the others appeared to approve them. The party followed Mrs. Price across the hall, to a door opposite Miss Chandler's. The room they entered was very similar to hers, its side windows looking out on the

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vista of another lawn and distant rows of dolorous pines and cedars.

"Would this suit you, Mrs. Price?" Long was quietly taking charge, but no one resented his leadership. "It occurs to me that if it would, your daughters could take the connecting dressing-room—I assume that they're in the habit of rooming together—and you could all three use the bathroom. Then you'd have a little suite to yourselves."

"It will do nicely, thank you." But the voice of Mrs. Price held the flat tones of utter depression.

"That seems to solve the whole problem," Long said. "As I remember it, there are two large rear rooms, looking over the back garden and with a bathroom between them, which might do for Miss Dixon and Miss Sabin. Let's go and look at them."

He spoke with almost his normal cheerfulness. His mind had now accepted the personal upheaval before him. Surely there was no tragedy in being made comfortable for six months in a fine old house like this.

Ethel Dixon and Naomi Sabin inspected their rooms indifferently, and both approved them with a word. Johnson led the pageant up the staircase to the third floor.

"I'm used to quick decisions," Long said as they all stopped on the upper landing. "If you lads don't mind, I'll take the big front room over Miss Chandler's, because I'm an older man and a selfish one. You young chaps can have the two rear rooms just above

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Miss Sabin's and Miss Dixon's. In return for my superior accommodations I'll put in a new bathroom for the three of us, as there's none on this floor. It will be an up-to-date one, I promise you, with a good shower. I dare say there's a big old linen closet or something of that sort that will make over into an excellent bathroom." To Johnson he added, "There are no quarters here for Stevens, I suppose?"

"I'm afraid not, sir."

"H-m-m. I might give him a six-months leave of absence," Long mused. "I happen to know he's very anxious to go back to Scotland for a visit. Could you look after me?"

"It would be a pleasure, sir." Johnson spoke eagerly, seeing a generous addition to his income.

"Then that's settled."

"Long's methods are the subtle ones of a steam-roller," George murmured to Henry Hutchins. "But fortunately his ideas are pretty good, and certainly he's quick on the trigger."

Unconscious of this compliment, Long beamed mildly upon his companions. It was absurd to get upset over unexpected happenings. With a little patience and judgment one could usually shape events. . . . And probably they'd all be as well off in six months as they had thought themselves after the will was read. By this time he was almost convinced of that. Yes, things were sure to work out satisfactorily. . . .

His sense of well-being lasted while they were descending the two flights of stairs. He stopped in the

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front hall, at a point where hats and coats could be reached without delay.

"Then I think there's nothing else?" He glanced from one to the other of the group, eager to be off. "Everything's quite understood, isn't it? A week from to-day finds us all settled here." He turned to the waiting butler, hovering in the background. "I'll have the plumbers at work on that new bathroom early to-morrow morning. They must make a rush job of it."

"What I'd like to know," Lily Price suddenly brought out, "is where we're going to get money for our other expenses during those six months."

She had voiced what all of them were thinking save Henry Hutchins, who was earning a living wage. Every eye in the group steadfastly fixed itself on Long's face.

"Oh," he said, in some embarrassment. "Oh, well, the expenses of the move into this house will be met by the estate. Miss Chandler has provided for that. Here, in the matter of lodging, food and service, we'll be guests. Unfortunately, no provision has been made for other expenses. You'll have to go on as you've been doing."

"Then how can we pay our debts?" Ethel Dixon wanted to know. As Long did not answer this poignant cry, her brother did it for him.

"We won't pay them," he ruled. "We've no money to waste on debts. That's nothing new. What interests me—"

"Then I'll say good afternoon," Long interrupted.

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"I have to meet an early dinner engagement in town."

He did not meet that engagement. He had forgotten Miss Webb and her appointment, but Miss Webb had not forgotten him. As he hurried past the library door, it opened and the nurse stood waiting, still garbed in her white uniform. By this time Long's hat was in his hand, his overcoat was on his arm. She read the meaning of these things, but her manner was unhurried.

"I'm afraid what I have to say may be a shock to you," she began when he had followed her into the library and taken a chair near the one in which she seated herself. He still carried his hat and coat, and she glanced at them as she spoke; but the glance was the type that dismisses the object it rests upon.

"I owe you an apology," he confessed. "I'm ashamed to say that I forgot—"

"I know. You had reason enough." She was actually trying to put him at his ease, and the lawyer smiled dryly. "It has been a hard day," she went on. "I know you're in a hurry, too. But I think you'll find that what I have to say is important."

Long sighed and waited. It *had* been a hard day. It was still a hard day. As soon as one began to feel a slight lessening of its tension, something else came along to tighten that tension again.

"Yes?" he said rather wearily. He had been loungeing a trifle in his chair because the chair happened to be comfortable. Miss Webb's next words brought him upright.

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"Mr. Long," she said, "I think it is my duty to tell you that I am not sure Miss Chandler's death was a natural one."

He turned, and the look he gave her was as menacing as an upraised blade. "What's that you're saying?"

"I think—in fact, I'm almost sure—that Miss Chandler was poisoned." She let this sink in before she made her next remarkable statement: "I believe she thought so, too."

For a moment the lawyer studied her in frowning silence. He realized that the young woman, wild though her statements were, was speaking with conviction.

"'If you thought these things, why did you wait till now to report them?" he curtly demanded.

"For two reasons. The first is that I'm not sure I'm right. The second is that I *am* sure Miss Chandler wanted it done this way."

"What makes you think that?"

"Her change of will only a few days before her death, and the fact that she is herding us all together in this house."

"You know about that?"

"Yes, I do. Four days before her death, the day she made the new will, she told me a little about her plans. You see, Jennie and I witnessed the will. She ordered us both to say nothing about it to any one. When she and I were alone again she talked to me. She asked me to stay on, at double wages. She wants

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us all herded here together till some scheme she made works out—"

Long shook off the sense of unreality that was stealing over him.

"Why in God's name should any one kill her?" he muttered. "She had to die soon, anyway."

"Not soon enough, perhaps, to suit some one who was in a hurry for her money. You know, only six weeks ago the specialists gave her another year, perhaps even two years."

"Have you given a hint of this notion of yours to any one else?"

"Only to Doctor Cary."

"Ah!" Long leaped at the admission. "What did Cary say to it?"

"He simply jeered." Miss Webb's firm lips set resentfully. For a moment she looked as Long remembered her. "He thought I was worn out. Doctor Cary is not modern, you know, and he isn't especially observant, either. He didn't come often, and he wasn't in close touch with the case. I doubt if he even knows anything about the new slow-acting poison I now suspect was used. But I admit that it's only a suspicion; I have no proofs."

"Wouldn't an autopsy have shown?"

"Of course. But the poison's very subtle. It works slowly and leaves less trace than most others. Its final symptoms—paralysis of the legs, abdominal pains, and all that—are the usual symptoms of Miss Chandler's disease in its last stages."

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"How do you happen to know so much about it?"

"I once had a case in which it figured."

"All right. We won't go into that now."

"I have no intention of going into it." Miss Webb's tone suggested that she was speaking to him from the hinterlands of space. "I merely answered your question."

Long got up and stood before her, looking down into the brown eyes she raised to meet his.

"Miss Webb," he said quietly, "I beg your pardon. I shouldn't have spoken as I did. But I needn't tell you that what you have just said has been a shock to me. Even yet I can't take it in. A suspicion like that, expressed by the patient's nurse . . ."

Miss Webb nodded understandingly, but she said nothing and Long turned and walked toward the window, hands deep-thrust in his trousers' pockets and shoulders bent a little as if under an unexpected weight.

"Hadn't she perhaps exhausted herself with all the business and dictation and letter-writing I understand was going on?" he asked at last, over his shoulder.

"She would have if she had done it often. But the last few weeks she saw almost no one except the family. Of course they continued to trail in and out. I had persuaded her to drop most of the daily business interviews she had been having with Jackson and White."

"If she died of poison—assuming for a moment

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that you're right—mightn't she have taken it herself?"

"Never! She wasn't that kind." The nurse's head rose in scornful repudiation of the suggestion. "Besides, she couldn't possibly have done it, even if she had wanted to. She had completely lost the use of her legs. Her bed was made two or three times a day, so she couldn't have hidden anything. And her medicine tables with their drawers and boxes were all on the other side of the room. She wouldn't have anything of the kind near her. She loathed the atmosphere of a sick-room, poor dear, and all the paraphernalia that went with it—including her nurses, some days," she ended with a sigh.

The lawyer wheeled toward her and expressed the thought he was clinging to:

"You say Cary doesn't take any stock in this suspicion of yours."

"That's true, but I've told you why. A younger doctor might have looked at it differently. Of course it is merely a theory," she added, and was silent again, plainly giving him time to reflect. "I didn't think of it seriously, myself, till she died and I began to wonder why she went so much sooner than we had expected. Then I found myself putting two and two together, and I've been doing it ever since.

"The point is that I wasn't alone in my suspicions," she went on as he stood thoughtfully regarding her. "I am convinced that Miss Chandler was suspicious. I had realized for weeks that she was afraid of some-

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thing—that she was getting nervous and frightened. That wasn't like her. Four days before her death she began to comment on her symptoms and to talk about family scandals and crimes, and her horror of publicity. She said if anything scandalous came up in her case, no matter what it was, she'd know how to meet it without calling in the police. And she added that if there was anything going on I didn't understand, I was to keep my mouth shut. That's exactly the way she put it. You know how brusque she was. Right after that, the same morning, she made me telephone for the new lawyer. Then she wrote a long letter to some one—to you, I suppose."

A sudden memory came to Long. Catherine Chandler had said: "Work with Miss Webb. She understands a good deal." His shoulders sagged lower. He realized in that moment that he was no longer a young man.

"All this may be pure imagination," he asserted. "Yours and hers. Or, more likely, you imagined hers."

"It may be. Doctor Cary thought it was nerves, and he advised me to have a rest. Of course when I saw how he was taking it I dropped the subject. I'm sure he'll never recommend me for another case." She went on in a different tone: "Miss Chandler did a lot of thinking the last weeks of her life. There were things going on I didn't understand, but I knew she was frightened and worried. She would lie staring at the wall for hours. . . ."

The woman was actually impressing him, though

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Long fought hard against the mental admission.

"Do you think she suspected any particular person?" he asked after another brief silence.

"No, that's just the point. It's to solve that question that she's . . ."

"Herding us all together." He hastened to supply the words, feeling that he could not endure hearing them again from her lips. "If it's all guesswork, as it appears to be, what was your object in telling me now?"

"I think she expected you and me to work it out, without police aid or publicity at any time. Besides, she told me to tell you."

"What!"

Miss Webb seemed startled by his vehemence. "She tacitly told me to. She said I was to consult you during our six months here whenever I needed advice. But of course we've got to proceed with the utmost tact. We've no case at all as the thing stands now. And Doctor Cary is definitely against us."

"Definitely against you, you mean. You're assuming entirely too much. You haven't convinced me that there's anything in this."

"I think time will convince you." The nurse spoke with calm conviction. She had shot her arrow into the air and seemed sure it would find its mark. "Time . . . and other things."

Long walked stiffly to the chair where he had left his hat and coat and put on the coat.

"Well, you've relieved your mind," he brought out.

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Then, his gloves forgotten in his hands, he stood looking at her uncertainly. "I'm not at all sure that there's anything in this," he sternly repeated. "I believe it's a mare's nest. Of course you won't mention it to any one else."

"She told me not to; that is, she said not to confide in any one else."

It was all so like Catherine. Given the conditions the nurse suspected, it was just the sort of thing Catherine would have done. This was the reflection that persisted, that disturbed him.

"It takes some thinking over," he admitted at last. "Meantime I must get back to town. I'll be out again to-morrow or the next day." He turned to the relief of practical details. "I suppose you're to act as a sort of super-housekeeper here, and get the place ready for our invasion."

"That was what Miss Chandler told me to do."

"Good-by, then; I'm off," he said, and started.

He wouldn't even wait for Johnson to open the car door, though that willing servitor had followed him down the front steps. Waterford was twenty miles away and he made the run back in half an hour. He wanted to get as far as he could from Catherine Chandler's house. He had taken care not to see any of the family again before he left—that family in which Catherine Chandler had perhaps imagined there was a killer. A nice six months he'd have, shut up with that group . . . with that suspicion in his mind . . . for of course it was in his mind. . . .

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The fresh November air braced him up, but he drove as though pursued by something tangible and malignant. Fast as he went, however, the thing he feared kept up with him. Nothing in the woman's notion, of course. But one can't ignore even the slightest hint of murder. . . . Herded together . . . A nice six months . . .

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CHAPTER III

DOCTOR CARY SIDESTEPS

THE following day brought the efficient Johnson a soul-shattering disappointment.

"By the way," Long informed him in the late afternoon, when he had inspected and approved the plans for the new bathroom, "I've decided that I must drop my hope of any upstairs service from you. It wouldn't be fair to you, nor to the rest. You'll have all you can handle. We must rig up some sort of quarters for Stevens. I'll be enough of a nuisance to you downstairs," he added kindly, as Johnson's facial disk showed his chagrin. "Can you find a room on the fourth floor for Stevens? That would be more convenient for us—if the women servants wouldn't mind. Stevens is a middle-aged man and very conventional," he smilingly ended.

The smile cheered Johnson. "We can manage it, sir. There's the fourth-floor room of Miss Chandler's maid, Nora. She'll be leaving, I suppose, unless the ladies want to keep her."

Long reflected briefly. The finances of the guests would not allow them to run to maids. Better let the girl go, but remain in touch with her for future use. Miss Chandler had somewhat conspicuously failed to

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provide for Nora in her plans, though she had so generously remembered the girl in her will.

"I don't think they'll need her," he decided aloud. "And Nora's room will do nicely for Stevens. See to that end of it, will you, Johnson?" A bank-note passed from hand to hand and Johnson's manner mellowed still more. Mr. Long had always shown a generous disposition.

"I'll tell Miss Webb you said to give Nora a month's wages and let her go," Johnson volunteered. "Then we'll be ready for Mr. Stevens whenever he comes."

"I'll speak to Miss Webb, myself," Long amended. "I must see that we have Nora's address, wherever she is."

After that, of course, he had to send for Miss Webb, and he dreaded the interview. However, it passed off smoothly enough. The attractive face of the nurse wore an expression reminding him that she had done her duty, but she also made it clear that she had no intention of bringing up the subject which was in the foreground of their thoughts. He had to do that, himself, after they had indulged in a little verbal fencing.

"I suppose there's no reason why we should keep Nora any longer," he tentatively advanced.

"None whatever, unless there's some work for her to do."

"Is there?"

"Not that I know of, though a houseful of women can usually keep a maid busy."

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"The women in this house can't afford a personal maid at present," Long ruled. Then, as Miss Webb waited in silence, he had to go to the point: "Is there any reason, connected with your suspicions, why we should keep Nora under observation?"

"None at all. Nora is a stupid and well-meaning girl, and her job had been a sinecure for six months. She's the sort of personal maid who is excellent in health but no good in sickness. She made Miss Chandler horribly nervous, so we kept her out of the sick-room. She'll be much better off away from this menagerie."

"All right. Give her a month's wages, warn her to keep us informed of her address, and tell her to come to my office if she needs any advance on her legacy."

"Very well, Mr. Long. Is there anything else?"

"Nothing just now, thanks."

He heard her go, heard the door close behind her. Then, strolling over to a window, he stared unseeingly at the outer world. The longer he looked forward to the coming half-year, the more, in one way, he disliked the vista. His impression that life was a pleasant affair was fading. Yet of course this whole poison scare might be the delusion old Cary considered it. However, he himself dared not assume that it was a delusion. Cary had no further responsibilities. Long had. He had made his decision after another reading of Catherine Chandler's letter.

Read in the light of Miss Webb's statement, that letter had impressed him. The new will lay sealed in

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his office safe, and he had shaped his course of conduct on the letter. There was some satisfaction in the knowledge, a satisfaction now momentarily blurred by the suspicion that his first assistant, the highly efficient Miss Webb, had no flattering impression of his gifts as a leader. Well, he was not a criminal lawyer. If one were needed, Catherine should not have selected a conservative person whose specialty was the handling of estates.

Perhaps it was the brief interview with the nurse that had caused the phenomenon, but mingled now with his depression and the dread he could not shake off was a new-born sensation. He did not analyze it clearly, but there was excitement and a certain thrill in this situation. It had been a long time since anything out of the ordinary had interrupted the placid routine of his existence. It was good to know that he was still human enough, still sufficiently warm-blooded and mentally elastic, to feel that tingle of the senses at the prospect of action, perhaps even of danger.

Yet back of it all, like a substantial prop, stood his faith in Cary. Surely the doctor must be right. Long did not mean to let his nerves get the better of him as the woman's nerves had done. There had been inner excitement in her manner that morning, though she had been outwardly so cool. The excitement was understandable, of course. Catherine had kept all those around her under a heavy nervous strain, and Miss Webb had borne the worst of the tension. He understood that the night-nurse, Miss Connolly, had been

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more fortunate, as the patient had usually had quiet nights. But he must look into that detail more closely, and right now. He had forgotten Miss Connolly. He rang the bell, and when Johnson responded, which he did with an alacrity suggesting that he had been lingering outside the door, he sent Miss Webb a message asking her to return to the library for a moment.

The room was now normal. It had been swept and aired, and through its windows the cold sunshine of a frosty day pierced its way. But to Long its atmosphere was still reminiscent of the heavy scent of flowers, of the presence of the silent figure that had lain there. He was glad when the opening door purred along the polished floor and Miss Webb came in again. He watched her as she crossed the room, taking the opportunity to give her a closer scrutiny than he had yet turned on her.

His first impression was one of surprise. She was really a superb-looking creature. He decided that she could not be more than twenty-nine or thirty, but she combined with her professional manner an air of entire sophistication. She held herself well, too, walking with head and shoulders back and the stride of a college girl on the golf-links. Possibly she had been a college girl. Her quiet assurance and her vocabulary suggested it. She still wore her white uniform. It was a becoming one and the small cap sat at an almost jaunty angle on her copper-colored hair. She had a taking little mole at the right of her left eyebrow.

He did not understand a sudden change in her till

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he realized that she was smiling as she came toward him and that the smile was as friendly as it was brilliant. He experienced a surprising sense of relief as he returned the smile. The suggestion of tension in her had departed.

"Sorry to call you back," he apologized when they were seated, and there was a new note of cordiality in his agreeable voice. "I forgot to ask you some questions I had in mind about Miss Connolly. Has she left?"

"Oh, yes. She came back for the funeral, but she left, professionally, the morning after Miss Chandler died."

Miss Webb stopped smiling and became professional again, as if the question had been an invocation.

"Was that wise?"

"It's customary. There's no reason why the trained nurse should stay on. I should have left the next morning, myself—perhaps even that night—if it hadn't been for Miss Chandler's instructions."

He put his next question almost reluctantly:

"Had you reason to think that Miss Connolly suspected anything was wrong?"

Hope Webb's auburn eyebrows rose.

"Miss Connolly," she said succinctly, "would hardly have suspected that anything was wrong if some one had entered the room and killed her patient with an ax. She was married two days after she left here, and she hasn't thought of anything but that marriage for months. If Miss Chandler had been restless and

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uncomfortable at night, I shouldn't have dared leave her to Miss Connolly. But fortunately she needed very little attention then, so Miss Connolly sat beside her bed and no one was the worse for it."

"What time did Miss Connolly go on duty?" Long asked.

"At six. She gave the patient her supper, and then read aloud to her till Miss Chandler took her sleeping powder, usually about half-past nine, and dropped off. Miss Connolly is a nice girl," Miss Webb added, "and she comes from one of our best training-schools. I'm not criticizing her at all. I suppose her state of mind was natural in such conditions. She went through the motions of looking after her patient, and she did them well enough from force of habit. But she has been living in a dream, and the only time I saw her really awake was when she heard that Miss Chandler had left her five hundred dollars. It seems that five hundred dollars will just furnish her new living-room."

Long laughed softly and rose. "We must see that she gets it without delay."

The nurse rose, too, and he faced her with a suggestion of friendly interest. She was far more human in this interview than he had yet seen her, and the phenomenon interested him.

"You haven't changed your mind?" he tentatively inquired. "You seem so alert and cheerful all of a sudden that I wondered—"

"Not a bit of it." Miss Webb spoke crisply. Then she smiled again. "But I'm not going to go around

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looking and acting like a sleuth in fiction," she confided. "I made that decision after my first talk with you. Another thing is certain, too. I'm not going to let this situation get on my nerves. It might, very easily, if one thought too much about it."

Long nodded. He had discovered that himself. "I see you're still clinging to your uniform."

"Yes. And I want to keep on doing it. It's the outfit I'm used to, and I feel most comfortable in it. But Miss Chandler told me to take all my meals with the family—she made a strong point of that—and I'm wondering about dinner dress. I suppose I ought to change at night. That will mean a few evening gowns."

"And you haven't them? Then I think we ought to supply them. That certainly shouldn't be part of your expenses." His look sharpened as he watched her face. He must be cautious in the matter of expenses. "How many evening gowns shall you need?" he asked in a severely businesslike tone. "Two or three?"

"Three will be enough. You'd better tell me how much I can spend on them and I'll keep within the amount."

"I'm not an authority on the subject. What would you suggest?"

"Two hundred dollars. I'll get very simple gowns, but I'll need slippers and silk stockings to match them, and a scarf or two."

"Two hundred will be satisfactory. Shall I give you a check?"

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"No. I'll pay for the things and give you the receipted bills as vouchers."

She was certainly efficient, but there was an amused look in her brown eyes, as if she had observed man's instinctive retreat when the money question comes up. He wondered whether Catherine Chandler had liked her. Perhaps she had toward the end. One could never be sure of anything with Catherine. But certainly she had trusted the nurse, and it behooved him to follow that example.

Yet he continued to ponder the matter as he entered his roadster and drove toward Doctor Cary's office. The trouble with a mess of this kind, he reflected—the sort of mess he was in—was that it made a man suspicious of every one and everything. He'd be up to his neck in suspicion in another week, and he loathed the prospect. He certainly must not begin by distrusting Miss Webb. According to the wishes of his late client, Miss Webb was to be in control of the purchasing. She was really to act as housekeeper, and at the same time to be an intimate member of the family circle. The family circle wouldn't be able to follow the reasons for that, but it was easy enough for him to do so. One other person might suspect the reason; the person for whom Catherine Chandler had spread her net . . . *if* she had spread one. And there he was again, back at the starting-point.

Long sighed and took the wheel in a tighter grasp. Then, resolutely, he detached his mind from Hope Webb. He had made a special appointment with Cary

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and he hoped the old chap wouldn't forget it. He, Long, would keep his roadster in the Chandler garage and drive back and forth to Waterford. . . . It might take more time than the express-trains, but it would be more comfortable. He loathed trains. . . . He was justified in making himself physically as comfortable as possible during the coming six months, since every indication pointed to considerable mental discomfort. . . .

And this job would play the mischief with his law practice. He wouldn't be able to keep his mind on anything else. However, he need not bother about that. Catherine herself had fixed his retainer, and it was far in advance of what he would have asked her. He could turn a lot of his own work over to a legal friend. He must earn Catherine's big fee, and there was only one way to do that. . . . A deep sigh broke from the lips of the harassed lawyer. The sound startled him and he uttered a mirthless laugh.

"If I'm like this now, I wonder what I'll be six months from now," he muttered, and grimaced at the thought.

He found Doctor Cary waiting in his office and looking impatient. Long was ten minutes late, and Cary mentioned this with pain as they perfunctorily shook hands. Long apologized and went at once to the point of his visit.

"I wanted to ask you a few questions about Miss Chandler's death," he began. "It was rather unexpected at the end, wasn't it?"

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"It was, and it wasn't." Cary irritably shook his big white head. "She might have lived on for awhile, or she might have died sooner than she did. One never knows how it's going to be in those cases."

"But wasn't it a fact, Doctor, that you and the specialists you called in had practically given her another year or two?"

"We held out hopes of it. She had amazing vitality. At the same time, none of us was surprised when she went. Look here!" He leaned forward in his swivel chair and put a wrinkled forefinger with a swollen first joint on Long's knee. His office hours were over, but the two men were in Cary's book-lined consulting room, the doctor at his office desk, Long before him on the anxious seat so many patients must have occupied. "Has that fool nurse said anything to you that's made you ask these questions?" the doctor brusquely demanded.

Long met steadily the keen old eyes.

"Is she a fool nurse?" he asked, and something in the tone and the quiet courtesy of the younger man steadied the older one and banished his momentary irritation. He sat back in his chair and his expression changed.

"I shouldn't have said that," he admitted. "She's a good nurse, one of the best I've seen in a sick-room. She's all right as long as she sticks to her job. But when she gets away from that and goes in for suspicions and diagnosis, she loses her head like the rest of them."

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"Then you're convinced, Doctor, that Miss Chandler's death was due to her disease and to no other cause?"

"Of course I am."

"And there was nothing—no incident or incidents at any time, except Miss Webb's report to you—that suggested anything wrong, unusual, criminal?"

"Of course there wasn't." But now the absolute certainty had left Cary's manner. His big face looked confused. "You don't mean that you are taking that stuff seriously," he added.

"I'm inclined to think, from her actions and a letter she wrote me, that Miss Chandler herself may have shared Miss Webb's suspicion," Long confessed.

"Nonsense!"

"It may be nonsense. I hope to God it is. But it's what brought me here to-day." As Cary did not reply to this, the lawyer added: "Certainly she was worried about something a few days before her death, and you know she changed her will and all her plans almost at the last minute. How long before Miss Chandler's death did you last see her?"

"About two hours."

"Was she conscious?"

"No."

Long rose. He was getting nowhere, and he had an irritating suspicion that the old doctor was keeping something from him.

"There's a simple way of settling the question," he said, slowly. "Any dose strong enough to cause her

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death would certainly leave some trace, though Miss Webb thinks there wouldn't be much if the poison she suspects was used. I suppose you'd have no objections to a post mortem, even at this late date."

Doctor Cary's big body moved irritably in the roomy swivel chair.

"No, but she would," he jerked out.

Long sat down again. "What do you mean by that?"

"The last time I saw Miss Chandler conscious," said Cary, with a sudden air of making a clean breast of it, "was twenty-four hours before her death. She told me she didn't want any post mortem. Her disease was an interesting one, and I thought she was afraid we'd want some exploratory cutting. Of course we hadn't considered any such thing, as I pointed out to her. I decided when I thought it over that possibly she had heard something about p.m.'s. Any layman who knows anything about them has a horror of them, and quite justifiably, too. Bodies aren't handled as the families would handle them," he added grimly, "and there isn't much of them left when the doctors get through. I know one trained nurse who was knocked out for days by seeing an autopsy. But that's neither here nor there. It's quite on the cards that Catherine Chandler had a horror of post mortems. She isn't the first patient I've had who has ruled against being cut up. On the other hand . . ."

"Yes?" Long prompted. Probably the tone was too official, too eager. Certainly it changed Cary's mood.

"Perhaps the Webb woman frightened her," he

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snapped. "In the condition Catherine Chandler was in, the mental state of some one close to her all the time might easily have affected her."

"Then you would oppose a post mortem now?"

"I'd consider it damn foolishness, as well as strictly against the wishes of my patient," the old doctor ended more mildly.

Long got up again, this time with finality.

"Doctor," he said emphasizing every word, "forgive me for my persistence, but this matter seems to me important. Are you absolutely convinced that Catherine Chandler died from disease and not from poisoning?"

Cary rose, but he did not face his visitor. Instead he looked past him, as if considering the question. Nevertheless he answered it in a tone of entire conviction:

"I am."

"That's very reassuring," Long said with a quick breath of relief. "But why did she think something unusual was going on? Why did she tell Miss Webb to keep her mouth shut?"

Cary snorted.

"That was good advice to give the Webb woman almost any time," he said. "She talks too damn much. See what she's done to you!"

"She has simply made me wonder why Miss Chandler was suspicious and afraid. I wish you'd explain that. Or do you even admit that she was?"

"She may have been suspicious," Cary conceded.

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"I can see that her request to me suggests that. She must have known we'd never dream of holding a p.m. without her permission. But if she had any suspicion," he added firmly, "it was put into her mind, in one way or another, by the Webb girl. And you can take my word that no one poisoned her."

"That's your final conclusion?"

"It is."

"Would she . . . could she . . . have poisoned herself?"

"Do you really think, knowing her as you did, that that's possible?"

"No."

"Neither do I."

"But, Doctor, just for the sake of argument, what do you think of this theory: Is it possible that Catherine Chandler suspected that she was poisoned, and decided that since she had to die anyway in a year or so it wasn't a matter to make a sensation over?"

Cary laughed shortly.

"You and I have known the late Catherine for a good many years," he dryly reminded his visitor. "Did she strike you as the type of woman who'd let some one poison her and get away with it?"

"No. But she might have had her own way of handling the matter. She was capable of that."

"She was capable of anything," Cary conceded. "But in this case you're barking up the wrong tree."

The interview ended with this tribute to their late friend, and Long returned to his roadster and drove

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thoughtfully back to the city through the early twilight. Notwithstanding Cary's stanch adherence to his guns, he believed the old doctor was less sure of his ground than he pretended to be. But at least the talk had settled one point. The testimony of her physician certainly justified her lawyer in following Catherine Chandler's last wishes. He was glad to leave the legal responsibility of that action on Cary's venerable but vigorous shoulders.

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CHAPTER IV

NAOMI GETS A MESSAGE

MISS CHANDLER'S guests were dining. It was their first evening together in their new home, and though the dinner was perfect, representing the combined efforts of four master minds, the occasion could hardly be considered a social success. Long admitted this as he looked around the table.

Concerning the matter of the meal itself, he had taken a definite stand with Miss Webb.

"I'm not sure how much you know about food aside from its dietetic value," he began with his usual suavity, "but it seems to me important that this family should have good meals. We have an excellent cook here and a superfine butler, and all we need is a little imagination in the ordering. If, in the beginning, you will let me make some suggestions—or Johnson can do it if you prefer—" he added as Miss Webb's expression subtly changed, "you'll soon get the right idea of what we want and then you can go on alone. I'm assuming," he added with his likable smile, "that planning the meals in a house like this is a little outside of your experience."

Miss Webb had admitted that it was. She had also proved hospitable to suggestions. The menu he gave

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her was a good one and the cook had done justice to it. But there was constraint at the table, due largely, Long realized, to that eloquently empty chair at its head, partly to the fatigue and excitement of packing and moving, and most of all to a nerve tension that obviously existed among the guests.

Only Mrs. Price seemed at ease. Long suspected that when she had taken time to think, it had been a definite relief to her to be assured of good food and lodging for herself and her daughters for half a year. He was greatly relieved by her change of manner, and decided that he understood it. In addition to the prospect of living without much expense for six months, Anne Price, worldling to her finger-tips, probably loved an atmosphere of wealth and luxury. Despite its mid-Victorian setting the heavy affluence of the Chandler dining-room appealed to her, and her beauty-loving senses basked in the æsthetic values of its soft lights, its flowers, and the blazing logs in its big fireplace. She ate none of the perfect dinner, but she was obviously calling on all her social gifts to amuse Long.

Seated at the end of the table opposite Miss Chandler's empty chair, and with Mrs. Price at his right, the lawyer met her overtures more than half-way. He had always liked and admired Anne Price, and to-night her rather faded blond beauty had quickened into something that almost stirred his pulses. He remembered that she had married very young. She could not be more than forty now and in this hour she looked

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thirty. There was even color in her cheeks—possibly rouge, but it was very becoming.

Naomi Sabin also was a lovely thing to see, and Miss Webb, seated between Henry Hutchins and George Dixon, was almost flamboyantly handsome in a water-green evening gown that did not suffer by comparison with the clothes of the women around her.

Thus far, however, she plainly felt no obligation to contribute to the gaiety of the occasion, and the rest of the young folks were silent and almost sullen. With the exception of Catherine none of them spoke often save Henry Hutchins; and when Henry spoke Long rather wished he wouldn't. The young man had a ponderous manner, an appalling lack of humor, and an obsession on first editions. He discoursed to Naomi on this pet topic, but Long suspected that the girl hardly heard what he said, though she answered him courteously enough.

The men did not linger in the dining-room after the women left. There was nothing to drink, and they had not yet grown used to that empty chair. They knew they could smoke in the living-room, where already the girls were setting the example.

"Thank God there's no empty chair standing around in here," George muttered as he lit his first cigarette.

Long sighed.

"There is," he confessed, "and I forgot to speak of it. It's the big Chinese chair you're sitting in, Naomi. It was brought down from Miss Chandler's

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room, by her orders, and it's to stand at the right of the fireplace, empty from now on. Evidently she wanted us to have a strong sense of her presence whenever we are together," he ended, his eyes on Naomi's paling face as she sprang from the chair.

"I beg Aunt C. C.'s pardon," Naomi said breathlessly, and dropped into the wing-chair Henry hastened to offer her, as if it were a refuge. There was a moment of silence, which George Dixon broke.

"This passion of Auntie's for our society is something new," he said quietly. "Every time Ethel drove me here to see her I got the feeling that the old girl wanted to turn the hose on me, and the last time I called—Gee! I wish I hadn't thought of that now!" he added with a shiver. Catherine broke in so suddenly that Mrs. Price's thin body jerked in its chair.

"Mr. Long," she began in her vibrant young voice, "there's something we all want to know. And now that we're comfortably smoking together around the fire, it seems a good time to ask about it. The family," she added with a smile, "has asked me to be spokesman."

"Speak on, my dear," Long invited. His dinner had been perfect and his cigar was good. His mood was peaceful. He had expected questions and though he would have preferred to answer them a little later, this was probably as good a time as any.

"We've been talking things over among ourselves," Catherine confessed. "Of course you knew we'd do that. It's clear enough that we're here on probation,

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all of us. Evidently we're to follow some plan of Aunt C. C.'s and to stand some sort of tests. But don't you think that in simple fairness we ought to know what the tests are? And if there are rules and regulations, as I suppose there must be, oughtn't we to know them, too?"

Long nodded, looking thoughtfully at the burning end of the cigar he had taken from his lips and was holding in his fingers. He knew that the eyes of every one in the room were on him, but he could not look around that expectant circle, could not meet those searching eyes. In that moment Catherine Chandler's plan seemed to him monstrous, a hideous travesty of justice. She was subjecting seven persons to a six-months inquisition based solely on what might be wholly unfounded suspicion that one of them was a criminal. It was an atrocious thing to do.

He forced himself to the issue before him.

"I wish I could answer as frankly as you've just spoken, Catherine," he began. He had decided that it would simplify matters and promote a friendly informality if he addressed all the young things by their first names. "But the truth is," he went on, "I'm almost as much in the dark about this business as the rest of you. I've told you about all I know, and we'll have to use our imaginations on the remainder. It will give them something to work on," he added with a pinched smile.

No one made any comment on this and he continued:

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"You are here on probation. Life here is a test. And (I've got to talk straight if I talk at all) it's plain enough that Miss Chandler changed her will because in the last three months of her life she had discovered facts about some or all of you that disturbed her. You must know what these discoveries were."

The hush in the room was painful. He hurried on:

"Keep in mind that Miss Chandler made the change of plan as easy for you as she could. You are her guests for six months. Your household expenses will be met. You will be very comfortable physically. She made generous appropriation for the running cost of the establishment, and left it to my discretion to increase the estimate if it proves insufficient. All that is satisfactory, assuming that you're willing to give half a year of your lives to her experiment; and you evidently are, for you're here. On the other hand we've got to admit that in a way you're somewhat like prisoners. Since you ask for the rules, I may as well tell you now that according to the set of rules accompanying her letter, and which I wasn't to give you till we were settled, no one is allowed to spend a single night out of the house except in case of serious illness which calls for hospital treatment."

"May I ask, sir," George Dixon said with sudden gravity, "if that last rule applies to you and Miss Webb as well as to us?"

"It does, coming in the form of a request."

"And to the servants?"

"No. The servants can come and go as they like.

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They'll all be on double salary, and all except Nora lose their legacies if they leave before the six months are up."

"I suppose," Catherine Price ironically murmured, "we're allowed our evenings out."

"Certainly; but only till midnight. Every one must be in by twelve."

"Just like Cinderella."

"That rule is going to cramp your style a bit, Cath," George Dixon grinned, trying to play up to her.

"A lot of bartenders will have an easier time from twelve to three every morning if you're not at large, George," Lily Price muttered. Mrs. Price said, "Lily!" in an absent voice. Her eyes were on Long's face.

"What's the penalty if one isn't in by twelve?" Catherine Price asked, abruptly dropping the effort at cheerfulness.

Long tried to answer lightly, but his voice showed tension. He was increasingly annoyed with Catherine Chandler.

"Outer darkness," he told them. "Johnson will lock up at midnight. No one can enter the house after that, and any one who is late more than three times is dropped from the group and must go and live elsewhere at his or her own expense."

George Dixon whistled softly. He was entirely sober, a condition, Long assumed, not frequent with him at this hour.

"Mr. Long—" it was Henry who asked this question, and for once the lawyer welcomed the sound of his

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voice—"can't you give us any better reasons why Aunt Catherine did this amazing thing?"

"She gives them, herself, in a way," the lawyer reminded him. "Don't you remember? She says that she considers it vitally important for the members of her family to know and understand one another better than they do. She wants you all together in her home, to work out certain problems."

Naomi spoke for the first time:

"Did she say *a* problem, or problems?"

"She said problems."

"But—you won't mind our frankness—just what is your job and Miss Webb's?" Henry brought out.

"We're partly observers and timekeepers," Long admitted. "Partly, perhaps, we're here as a sort of leaven to the family group. A housekeeper was needed, and evidently Miss Chandler had faith in Miss Webb. And my own position as executor and trustee is in itself enough excuse for my being here."

"In other words," Naomi said quietly, "you two are merely 'innocent bystanders.'"

It was a chance remark, Long decided, but it startled him into a quick glance at Miss Webb. He met her look. She had been surprised into an eye-flash at him.

"Why should you and Miss Webb have to be prisoners after midnight? We can't help feeling," Catherine contributed, "that there's something very queer back of it all. We think we ought to know what it is."

"Yes," said Mrs. Price, suddenly looking ten years

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older, and speaking so sharply that Long looked at her in surprise, "we ought to know what it is."

There was a definite tension in the circle, and he decided to put an end to it. He knocked the ashes from the end of his cigar, restored the cigar to his lips, leaned back, and drew in a satisfying mouthful of smoke.

"See here," he said cajolingly when he had exhaled it: "why not be philosophical about this business? We know that Catherine Chandler had her own way of doing things. We know that she was impulsive and at times erratic. It seems clear that she thought a quiet half-year would be an extremely good thing for most of you. She knew—again I must be very frank—that many of you were burning the candle at both ends. She had heard about heavy drinking among you. She knew that some of you danced most of the night and slept most of the day. She didn't approve of that sort of thing.

"Perhaps she thought you'd make ducks and drakes of her money. Perhaps she thought you'd disgrace the family. She appears to have discovered a lot of things about you she didn't like. She may have decided that six months of quiet living and early hours might pull you up and make you over—to say nothing of the suggestion of her own continued presence and the beautiful example of plain living and high thinking Miss Webb and I are here to furnish," he ended grimly, for by this time Mr. Long was very sorry for himself.

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"That's all right," Henry Hutchins unexpectedly observed, "but how about me? I don't drink all night. I've got a regular job and I work at it. And how about Naomi? She was running a chicken farm. That's a fairly innocent occupation, and she tells me she was usually in bed by ten and up by six. How about Aunt Anne?"

Miss Webb spoke for the first time, her eyes on a handkerchief in the corner of which she was embroidering a small monogram. She was sitting a little distance from the circle, in a chair beside a reading-lamp, but it was now clear that she had missed none of the talk around her.

"Mrs. Price," she said quietly, "has had to keep very late hours. Miss Chandler often spoke of that. She was very much disturbed lately by the condition of Mrs. Price's health."

Anne Price cast a look at the speaker so vindictive that it actually made Long catch his breath. Then she leaned forward in her chair and extended her thin hands toward the fire. The hands shook and she drew them back.

"I am very nervous," she said in a choked voice. "I admit it. I don't think it's much of a secret from any of you."

Henry Hutchins followed the line of his argument like the self-centered young man he was.

"Admitting that," he persisted again, "how about Naomi and me? In many ways I don't mind this arrangement in the least. It saves me a lot of money that

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I can spend on my collection. And," he added as an obvious afterthought and with a glance at Naomi which she did not meet, "I'll enjoy the company. But I object to being put into a position I don't understand. I hate to 'go it blind' as we're all doing. And Naomi—"

"Naomi," that young person interrupted concisely, "will speak for herself. Thank you very much, Henry, but I don't in the least mind leaving my chicken farm and living here. The farm wasn't paying, anyway. I shall be glad to have myself off my hands for six months. As to this experiment, I think I know perfectly well what it means."

Henry immediately asked what she meant by that, and Mrs. Price straightened in her chair and turned a strange look on the girl.

Naomi shook her head. "I'm not saying any more about it. Perhaps I'm wrong. Anyway, the guess of any of you is as good as mine."

"All that's that," Ethel Dixon said, trying to speak indifferently. "How about giving us the rest of the rules?"

"There aren't many," Long said. "The important one, next to the midnight rule, is the one requiring each of you to make a visit to Miss Chandler's room this week and sit there alone for half an hour. That's not so odd as it may seem. It's evidently merely a part of her plan to have you all feel in close personal touch with her. Naturally, you will feel her influence more strongly there than anywhere else."

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"And it will give me a chance to paste in some new book-plates," Henry Hutchins suggested.

"No, it won't," Long smiled. "You're expected to give the time to your hostess, and to quiet thought."

"I wonder what Lil's brain will do," George Dixon mused aloud, "when it tries to think."

"Funny," said Catherine, with her hard little yelp of laughter. "Every one else was just wondering what George would do when thinking time came."

"Children," sighed Mrs. Price. The temporary vivacity of the dinner hour had wholly left her. She drooped wearily in her chair, her fair graying hair against its high back, her face livid, her dark-circled eyes on the blazing logs. An hour ago she had looked thirty. Now she was an astringent prophecy of what her daughter Lily might be thirty years hence.

"Why the devil did Aunt C. C. want us to go to her room and sit there in solitary state?" George muttered. "With all due respect to the old girl, that's going to be an infernal nuisance."

Miss Webb spoke again.

"Seeing guests one at a time was one of Miss Chandler's fixed ideas," she said. "As long as I was with her I never knew her to have several visitors in the room, except once, and that was a matter of business. She usually said it tired her too much, but once she confessed that it was really because she never 'got at' more than one person."

"What the devil did she want to get at?" George almost groaned. "She was always trying to get at

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something in me that wasn't there. Do you and Mr. Long have to make these calls too, Miss Webb?"

"No."

Long amplified the terse admission:

"Only members of the family make that pilgrimage. As to why she wanted it, which was your first question, perhaps your aunt felt that you weren't thinking enough, weren't communing with your own souls, as the phrase goes. Or perhaps she wanted you to understand her better, as you may do if you think about her more. By the way, she seems to have planned to have each of you get some kind of message from her during the visit. Miss Webb knows more about that than I do." He saw them exchange glances and he looked at his watch, eager to get away from the subject. "Any one ready for a game of billiards?" he tentatively inquired.

There was a moment's silence, which Henry broke:

"I'll play, sir, if you'll make allowances. I'm pretty bad at it."

"No, I'll play; and I'm pretty good at it," Ethel Dixon briskly announced.

As she and Long started toward the door the voice of Miss Webb stopped them.

"How about the little upstairs pilgrimage?" the nurse was asking. "I suppose some one ought to go to-night. Which one is it to be?"

The group hesitated, its members again glancing uncertainly at one another. There was a long silence, broken only by the fretful whir of an old clock pre-

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paring to announce the hour. Then Naomi stood up.

"I'm perfectly willing to go first and get it over," she crisply announced.

Miss Webb folded the handkerchief and rose with a purposeful air.

"I'll go with you," she told Naomi.

"And turn on the lights? Thanks. I'm not sure I know just where they are."

"There won't be any lights," Miss Webb placidly mentioned. "That's why I suggested going up and getting you settled."

"Oh . . . I didn't know that." Naomi spoke blankly and the rest looked startled.

"Do you mean to say," Lily Price jerked out, "that we've got to go up into that vault and sit there without a blim?"

"Yes. Didn't you know that?"

"No. I don't think any of us did. What's the big idea? It's . . . it's . . ." Miss Price's vocabulary was not large. She drew on it now with the usual result. "It's simply beastly!" she finished.

"Does 'ums guilty conscience prick 'um in the dark?" George asked with a hollow effort at lightness.

"No, it doesn't. But the thing is so damned weird."

Miss Webb and Naomi left the room. Long went with Ethel to the billiard room, which was across the hall from the dining-room. He did not speak of the little vagary of his client which had just been discussed. Neither did Ethel refer to it as the two chalked their cues, but he knew her mind was full of it.

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In the upper hall Miss Webb stood on the threshold of Miss Chandler's room, holding in her hand the knob of the yawning door. A thin line of light pierced the darkness within.

"If you don't mind waiting in the hall a few moments," the nurse remarked, "I'll go and get things ready. As Mr. Long suggested, 'there's a reason' for all this, and some preparation is necessary. If I'd known in advance who was to come to-night, I could have made it this afternoon. I'll find that out hereafter."

She crossed the threshold and hesitated, looking back at the girl. Something in Naomi's face must have touched her, for she returned and spoke quickly and kindly.

"This may give you a little jolt for a moment," she said, "but you'll realize immediately just what it is. Remember this: no one knows anything about the message you get except yourself. I make the adjustment, but I have no idea what you'll hear. I'll call you in a minute."

She reëntered the room and the door closed behind her. Left alone in the brightly lighted hall, Naomi walked to its wide front window and stared out into the night. It was cool and frosty. The stars looked big and very near. Her heart was beating faster than usual. She quieted her singing nerves and tried to fix her thoughts on the pageant of the sky. The inverted chair of Cassiopeia hung low before her. Superb Orion was stalking up over the horizon with Sirius at his heels.

Miss Webb spoke behind her and she started.

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"Sorry I frightened you," said the nurse.

"You didn't."

The other waived the point.

"It's just five minutes past ten," she mentioned in her cool voice. "If you will get into the chaise longue and make yourself comfortable, I'll close the door and come back for you in half an hour. Naturally, you won't be able to follow the time."

"Do I have to sit in that particular chair?"

"Yes."

"There will be some light from somewhere, won't there?—through the windows, or a transom?"

"No, the transoms are covered and the windows have thick curtains. It will be pretty black in here," the nurse said cheerfully. "Evidently Miss Chandler didn't want anything to distract you while you are getting the message. You won't mind?" she added, with a sudden keen look at the girl's face.

"No . . . not really. But I don't pretend to like it. However, of course I understand it. Aunt Catherine thought that if we had a light here we'd read instead of thinking about her."

"Which is exactly what most of you would have done," Miss Webb agreed. "You heard Mr. Hutchins's remark about his book-plates. Now, make the best of it. I'll be in my room, on the other side of the bathroom, so I'll hear you if you call."

"Why should I call?" Naomi's shining black head was high. She flushed hotly.

"You might be nervous."

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"I shan't be; but thanks very much, just the same. I'll make myself comfortable."

The girl crossed the threshold into the room, dimly illumined by the hall light entering through the still open door, and settled down into the chaise longue, which stood directly facing her. Her manner was almost defiant. Miss Webb passed into the hall.

"All right?" she asked from the threshold.

"All right, of course . . . thanks."

The door closed, and blackness settled upon the room and its occupant. Naomi stared into that blackness with a shaking heart. She had a horror of intense darkness. The room was as quiet as it was dark . . . save for a slight purring sound. Then a voice spoke so abruptly that she half leaped from the chair.

"My dear Naomi," it began. "It isn't often that I've had the pleasure of talking to any of you when you were unable to interrupt. I have it now, and I'm going to make the most of it."

Naomi relaxed in the chaise longue, exhaling a shaken breath. Aunt C. C.'s voice. A record, of course —a phonograph record! And the little purring, scratching sound was the needle on the disk, the disk Aunt C. C. had had especially made for this half-hour. How amazing the reproduction was—that deep familiar voice, with its unmistakable modulations, its incisiveness, its occasional rasping quality! . . .

"Listening is about the hardest thing you young folks do nowadays," the voice went on. "I haven't often been allowed to finish a sentence addressed to

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any one of you, though I admit that you and Henry are not so bad in that respect as the rest of them. Still, I rather like the idea of a short monologue which none of you can interrupt. Perhaps it isn't quite fair. Perhaps some other things I'm doing are not quite fair. I'm past worrying about that. I had thought I was past worrying about anything except my health, but lately I've had reason to change my mind. I'm worrying about you, and about the rest of the hapless clan that have my blood in their veins. I'm worrying about you all. But it's you I'm worrying about when I dictate this record, Naomi. Pull yourself up to it, child, for I'm going to tell you why. . . ."

At the end of a little more than half an hour Nicholas Long was summoned from the billiard room into the hall. The summons came from Miss Webb, who was waiting outside. She motioned him to close the door behind him as he emerged, and then stood looking at him with an odd expression.

"That girl fainted in there," she brusquely announced.

"What girl? Where?" Long's mind was on the billiard game from which he had been called away at an interesting moment. Ethel Dixon had demonstrated that her tribute to her own skill was justified. He blinked uncertainly at the nurse.

"Miss Sabin, of course. She fainted in Miss Chandler's room. I found her unconscious when I went in there just now to tell her the time was up."

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