WO FLIGHTS UP

RY ROBERTS RINEHART

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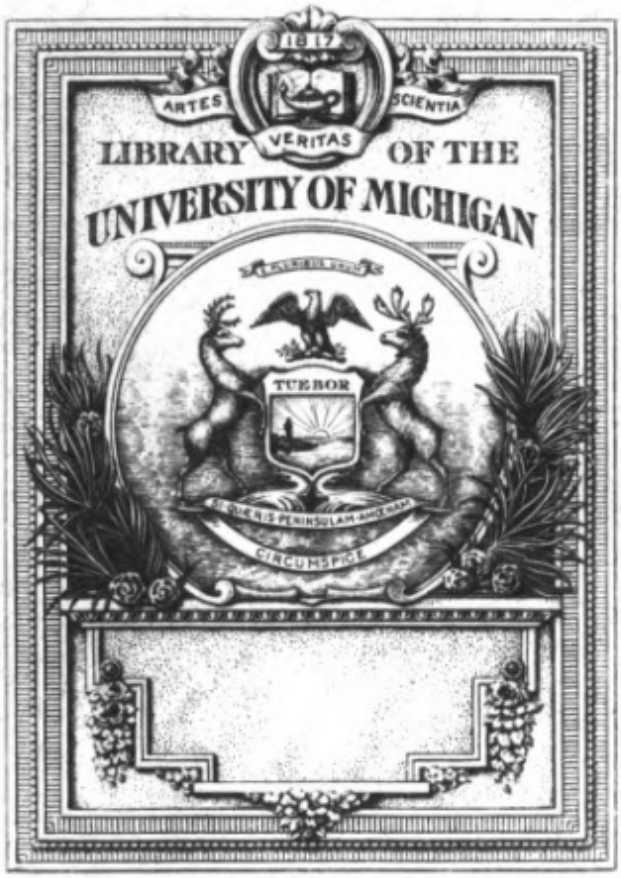

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TWO FLIGHTS UP

BY

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THE MAN IN LOWER TEN,
THE CIRCULAR STAIRCASE,
DANGEROUS DAYS, ETC.

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CHAPTER ONE

ANSWERING THE FRONT DOOR AT THE Bayne house was a lengthy matter. The postman had learned this long ago, and now he merely laid the mail in the vestibule and went away.

First, Mrs. Bayne would look in the old reflecting mirror which still hung from her bedroom window and take note of the ringer. Then she would whisper cautiously over the stair rail:

"It's the milk bill. I'm not in." Or, as had been happening more and more frequently for the last six months: "It's Furness, Holly. Come right up, and I'll send down your Aunt Margaret to receive him."

And Margaret, who was Mrs. Bayne's sister, would put down the napkins she was hemming by hand for a department store and sulkily take off her apron and smooth her hair. The forefinger of her left hand was roughened with the needle, although she kept a piece of pumice

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stone on her washstand to smooth it. Mrs. Bayne thought no lady should have a roughened forefinger, and so Margaret had formed the habit of keeping that hand shut with the finger tucked away, so to speak. As a result she rather gave the appearance of meeting the world with one hand clenched.

On the staircase perhaps she would pass Holly running up, escaping, one might say, from the kitchen. The bell would ring again, and without haste but with an air of slight impatience at some invisible servant, Aunt Margaret would open the door.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Brooks! I *thought* I heard the bell. Really, these days . . . ."

But by that time Mr. Brooks would be inside, putting his hat on the old table, with his gloves beside it, and his stick leaning against a chair.

"Anybody at home?" he would ask.

And Margaret would say archly: "Well, *I'm* at home, and I dare say we can locate Holly somewhere."

He would wander into the long parlour, which Mrs. Bayne always called the drawing room: a faded chamber, with overstuffed furniture neatly mended, for the Bayne house had been furnished before the vogue for old things

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came in; and to cover the sounds of stealthy movements overhead Margaret would make conversation. For instance:

"I saw Mrs. Rodney White downtown the other day. She's growing very stout, isn't she?"

"Eats too much," Mr. Brooks would say calmly. "By the way, I heard a good story about him last night. The other day at the Rossiters' dinner, he . . . ." And so on.

Margaret would listen absorbedly. Mr. Brooks had an endless fund of gossip which Margaret would absorb as eagerly as perhaps Eve may have listened to whispers about her lost Paradise. Every evening he dined somewhere, but always with the Right People, of course, and until the last six months he had been accustomed to wander, after business hours, from one tea table to another.

Not that he cared for tea. As a matter of fact, he loathed tea. But there was always talk and sometimes whisky and soda, and he managed to pick up quite a little of both. He was a tall, rather thin young man; as Mrs. Bayne said, he was not handsome, but he was distinguished. As a matter of fact, he was neither.

For the last six months, however, he had been calling at Kelsey Street instead. There was

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no whisky and soda there, only tea. However, there was Holly. Her full name was Hollister, which had been her mother's; after Mrs. Bayne's—well, what you might term widowhood, she had been strongly tempted to call herself Mrs. Hollister Bayne, but Margaret had been so absurd about it that she had not.

In the drawing room the tea table would be ready. Mrs. Bayne always laid it after luncheon, before she went upstairs for what she termed her siesta. It was only necessary in case of a caller to light the spirit kettle, and "not bother to ring." Furness Brooks had been coming twice a week for months, and he had not yet discovered that the Baynes kept no servant. Margaret Hollister would put a match to the lamp under the kettle, and then ooze out.

"If you don't mind, I have some notes to write. And I'll tell Holly you're here."

But on the October day this story opens, the routine had been changed. Mrs. Bayne, dressed in black silk, had sat all morning in the drawing room and most of the afternoon, and in the third-story front room Holly was working like a young fury. Only Margaret continued grimly to hem napkins, holding them close to her eyes; she needed glasses, but specialists were expensive.

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It was one of Mrs. Bayne's pet fictions that if dear Margaret did not do so much "fancy work" she would have fewer headaches.

When at last the doorbell rang, the sounds on the third floor ceased, and the hush of gentility descended on the house. It rang a second time before Mrs. Bayne moved. Then, picking up a book and inserting a finger in it, she went to the front door and opened it. A burly young man was standing outside.

"I *thought* I heard the bell," said Mrs. Bayne graciously, looking back over her shoulder for an imaginary servant. "Really, these days . . ."

She looked again at the young man. He seemed respectable but not particularly affluent. Not that he was shabby, of course, but compared with the spick-and-span-ness of Furness Brooks—of course, Furness Brooks had his own bodyservant. A Filipino. And then the man on the doorstep was young; she had not considered that possibility.

It took only a second, all this. She appraised the young man, and he looked at her. Then he coughed apologetically.

"I believe—but perhaps I have made a mistake. There was an advertisement of a room for rent, and it gave this number."

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