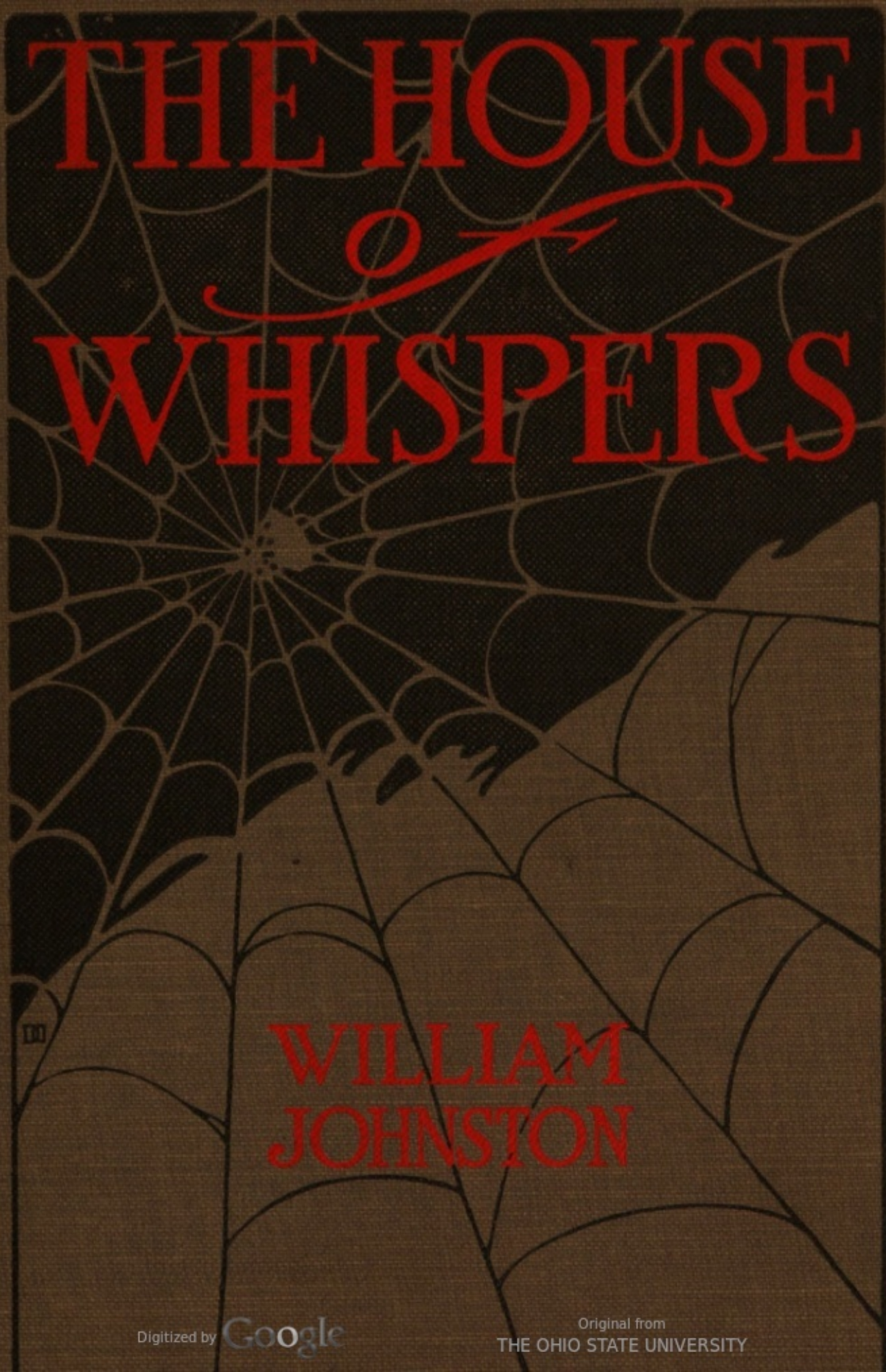
THE HOUSE OF WHISPERS



WILLIAM JOHNSTON

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THE HOUSE OF WHISPERS

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By WILLIAM JOHNSTON

LIMPY
The Boy Who Felt Neglected

THE YELLOW LETTER

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We both of us realized that we must be surrounded with some potent evil forces. FRONTISPIECE. *See page* 81

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THE HOUSE OF WHISPERS

BOSTON
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY
1910

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FRONTISPIECE. See p. 91

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THE HOUSE OF WHISPERS

BY

WILLIAM JOHNSTON

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY

ARTHUR WILLIAM BROWN

BOSTON
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY
1918

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THE HOUSE OF WHISPERS

CHAPTER I

WITH an exclamation of annoyance I crumpled up the note from my great-uncle Rufus and flung it on the floor, more than half minded to disregard it entirely. My disappointment at its contents was the one thing needed to complete the utter misery of a wretched day.

Only that morning, my roommates Birge and Roller, fortunate fellows, had been informed that their applications for the ambulance service had been accepted. There had been barely time for them to catch the steamship sailing for France. Our year of happy companionship had come to an abrupt end.

"Cheer up, old man," cried the optimistic Birge, "your luck will change some time."

"Right," said Roller, as he stooped to give a final tug to the straps of his new kit bag, "a chap

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as crazy about Adventure as you are is bound to meet her soon."

"Stop it," I cried in desperation. "It is you two who are to have the great opportunity. Soon you'll be seeing shrapnel burst, aeroplanes battling, regiments charging, heroes dying, and I—I'll be sitting here alone in a hall room, eating my heart out with lonesomeness and envy, spending my days at an uncongenial desk and my nights, God knows how, after you fellows have gone."

"You never can tell," chirped old Birge, "all kinds of strange things happen right here in New York. You may be the one that has had a belly-ful of adventure before we return—if we do."

His last three words gave us all a sobering thought. There was a chance, more than a chance, that never again on this earth would we three be together again. Eight of our college mates had preceded Birge and Roller to the great battlefield. Already three of them lay in hero graves somewhere under the lilies of France.

The silence of a sad parting fell on us. The taxicab came and we drove together to the pier with hardly a word spoken. Men who have been

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through college days together and for a twelve-month afterward have been congenial roommates need no words to express the sort of thoughts we all were having.

As we shook hands at the gangplank, old Roller spoke again, a glisten of tears in his eye, something almost prophetic in his voice.

"Nelson," he said, "I feel it in my bones that something is going to happen for you soon, something thrilling."

"I wish to God something would!" I answered bitterly.

Disconsolately I waved them a last adieu from the dock and took the subway up town to our dismantled quarters. In a black mood I railed against the fate that had left me behind, poignantly lamenting the lack of the eight hundred dollars that would have set me free to accompany them.

Two letters, thrust under the door in lodging-house fashion, awaited my home-coming. One of them I recognized at once as my mother's weekly billet of good advice and tossed aside to be read when I was in a better frame of mind. The other was in a cramped, unfamiliar hand-

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writing. As I studied the envelope curiously a suspicion as to the writer's identity flashed into my mind and eagerly I tore it open. My great-uncle, Rufus Gaston, was an old, old man. It must be from him. What could he be writing to me about? Rufus Gaston was rich—worth many millions.

It was merely an invitation to dine with him and his wife. Disgustedly I flung it aside. It capped the climax of my dissatisfaction with everything. Here were my two chums starting off to the war, and here was I, Spalding Nelson, twenty-six, strong in physique, save for a "foot-ball knee" that had barred me from military service, thirsting for excitement, left behind in the prosaic business world and now bidden to an uninteresting meal with two decrepit old relatives. I made up my mind not to answer the note. My great-uncle Rufus could go hang for all of his millions. I would not go near him.

The sight of my mother's letter lying unopened on my desk served to recall to me that it was she who had prevented my going. Poor mother! She and I had been at cross-purposes ever since my father's death while I was a young-

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ster. It seemed to me that always she had opposed everything I wanted to do.

After I left college she had found a place for me in the office of one of my father's friends in the little Western city where our home was. I had been two years getting away to join Birge and Roller in New York. Most of all she had set herself against my going to France. She did not believe in war. I was the only man left in the family. She was far from well. If anything should happen to her, my young sisters had only me to look to. When these pleas had failed to move me, she had not hesitated to remind me that I was in her debt.

Unfortunately this was true. My years at college had cost me more than my small patrimony. I had borrowed freely from her, expecting soon to be able to repay her. Like all young graduates I had vastly overestimated my earning capacity. Three years had elapsed, and I still owed her eight hundred dollars.

"I do not see," she had written me, "how you can honorably feel free to go while you are in my debt. To furnish you funds at college your mother and sisters practised many economies.

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The girls are now reaching an age when their expenses will be much greater. I need the money for them. The least you can do is to pay it back before you give up your position and go off on wild-goose chases."

For this argument I could find no answer. My obligation to her was a debt of honor that must be paid before I could be my own master. Each week I had been putting away five dollars and as it accumulated had been sending her a money order. If I was to continue to do so, with my comrades away and no one to share my rent bills, I realized that I must speedily seek cheaper quarters.

While I was debating what to do I began to read my mother's latest letter. The first part of it repeated her many arguments, but the latter part was more interesting. She wrote:

"Two days ago I received a letter from my father's brother, Rufus Gaston, upon whom you called when you first went to New York. He asked about you and made me a proposition concerning you. I did not venture to give him an answer. Your views and mine are so seldom in accord. I gave him your address and suggested

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that he write to you himself. Probably he has done so by this time."

Hastily I rescued my great-uncle's crumpled note from the floor and smoothed it out. If Rufus Gaston—with his millions and no direct heir—had made a proposition concerning me, his letter took on a vastly more interesting complexion. Carefully I reread it, seeking for some hidden meaning between the lines, but it gave no clue to what he had in mind. He merely expressed the hope that I would be able to dine with him and his wife informally next Thursday evening.

What could it mean? It was at least well worth looking into. Mr. Gaston was seventy-four. He had made a fortune in the South American trade, retiring at sixty-five. There was only himself and his wife. Their two children had died in infancy. On the Gaston side, through my mother, my sisters and I were the only blood relations. I wondered if it could be that old Rufus was thinking of making me his heir—heir to the Gaston millions!

As I penned a cordial acceptance of his dinner invitation I determined to set myself to pleasing

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the old couple whom I had met only once, on the occasion of my call. A few years ago I would have despised the thought of catering to wealth, but since I had discovered how difficult it was to earn money and how much more difficult to save it, my views had changed.

I could hardly wait for the day he had set for me to dine with them to arrive. I found myself approaching their residence fully three-quarters of an hour before the time named. When I discovered how early I was, I decided to loiter in the Park for a few minutes. Old Rufus recently had given up his Avenue residence and now lived in one of those stately apartment buildings erected in the East Eighties. I turned into Central Park opposite my great-uncle's street and dropped into the first bench I came to, depositing beside me a bunch of roses I had purchased as my first move toward winning my great-aunt's affections. Lighting my pipe, I gave myself up to pleasant reveries, from which I was aroused by finding my roses tossed suddenly to the ground at my feet.

"Pardon me," I said indignantly, "but those belong to me."

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"Benches ain't for bundles," croaked an evil voice beside me.

Recovering my flowers, I turned to find seated beside me a rat-eyed young fellow, cheaply dressed, eying me with an insolent stare. As I looked at him, he began crowding over toward me. Plainly it was his intention to oust me from the bench.

"There's plenty of room on those other benches over there," I suggested resentfully.

"Beat it yourself if you don't like it here," he retorted, blowing the smoke from a cheap cigarette in my face. "I got a date here, and I'm going to stay, see?"

I answered with an angry retort and hot words followed. We had almost come to blows when the bushes opposite us suddenly parted. I caught sight for just a second of a villainous face, that of a man about forty, an unforgettable face with a red scar across the left cheek. He raised one finger in an imperative gesture, signaling to my unwelcome companion on the bench. With a profane exclamation of dismay, the rat-eyed fellow sprang up and walked hastily away along the Park path. Wondering what it was all about,

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I watched him out of sight around a turning of the asphalt and then glanced toward the apartment house where in a few minutes I was to be a guest.

As I looked a young girl came out of the house and walked slowly toward the Park. In mere idle curiosity I watched her, for the sex has had little attraction for me. A man brought up in a house of women, with the too constant companionship of a mother and two sisters, is apt to be long in discovering fascinations in feminine charms.

At the corner the young woman hesitated. She seemed to be debating whether to continue on down the Avenue or to turn into the Park. Apparently the lure of the greenery won her, for she came on slowly toward where I was sitting. As she drew nearer I observed her with still greater interest, for she was one of the prettiest girls I ever had seen. Her slim figure, her dainty ankles, her carriage, everything about her suggested the patrician. Her face, rosy and youthful, was set off by a jaunty feathered toque, from under which a pair of soft, black, roguish eyes, shaded by long lashes, looked out above a

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dainty nose, just a bit tip-tilted, on either side of which a fugitive dimple played.

To my great amazement she walked right up to me and stopped short. I observed then that she seemed to be greatly agitated. Involuntarily I sprang to my feet and removed my hat, feeling certain that she had mistaken me for some one else.

She looked straight at me with an odd tightening of the lips. Into her great dark eyes came a look in which pride and fear seemed to mingle with utter loathing.

"I am here," she said.

In my confusion I mumbled something, I hardly knew what. She looked me up and down with a puzzled air and raised her hand to a red carnation she was wearing.

"You were to wear one, too."

"I don't understand," I answered.

"Didn't you," she asked hesitantly, "didn't you come here about the papers ——"

"What papers?"

"You know ——"

"I don't know," I replied. "I know nothing about any papers. You must have mistaken me for some one else."

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"But this was the place—this bench—the first bench?"

"I sat down here quite by accident."

"Oh!" she exclaimed with a sigh of relief. "And you're not wearing a red carnation, either."

I recalled then with misgiving that the ill-favored youth who just a moment ago had disputed the bench with me had been wearing a red carnation, and that he had muttered something about having a date. Yet it did not seem possible that a girl of this sort would be having a rendezvous with a scamp like him. I determined if possible to ascertain the girl's mission.

"I am merely waiting here," I hastened to explain, "until it is time for me to keep a dinner engagement with some relatives in the apartment house from which you came."

As I spoke I noticed that the fear and loathing had vanished from her eyes and that she was looking with relief at a little college pin I was wearing. She was blushing now from confusion at her mistake, and the rising red in her cheeks added greatly to her exquisite loveliness.

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"I was to meet some one here," she faltered; "you quite understand, don't you?"

"I understand perfectly," I answered, and recalling the scar-faced man who had been lurking in the bushes, I hurried on to say, "but if I can be of any service ——"

"Thank you so much," she interrupted. "There is nothing you can do." Then as if the words forced themselves out she added desperately, "There's nothing any one can do."

"You are in trouble," I cried. "Do let me help you."

"No, no," she sobbed, apparently overwhelmed by whatever it was that was besetting her. "It's nothing—nothing any one can help."

"Tell me about the man you were to meet here."

"Who are you?" she demanded, her suspicion suddenly rising at my question. "You're not a detective?"

"Far from it," I answered amusedly. "I'm just plain Spalding Nelson, on my way to dine with my great-uncle Rufus Gaston."

"Oh!" she said, relieved, "their apartment is on the same floor as ours."

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"Tell me about the man you were to meet," I insisted. "I may have seen him."

"Did you? What was he like?" she demanded eagerly.

"Don't you know him?" I countered.

"No, I never saw him. I don't even know who he is. I only know that there was to be a man waiting here on this bench this evening. We were both to wear red carnations. I was to come here alone, to see him and to get the ——"

She stopped abruptly and tearing off the flower she was wearing, trampled it viciously under her foot.

"It must have been he who was waiting here," I said. "He wore a flower."

"It must have been," she cried, all excitement. "What was he like?"

"Not so loud," I warned her, fearful lest they might still be lurking about and overhear us. "There were two of them."

"Two," she whispered, turning pale.

"Yes, one waiting here on this bench, and the other, a villainous scar-faced fellow, hiding in the bushes yonder."

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"I dare not go on with it," she sobbed, "I dare not! I dare not! Oh, what shall I do?"

"The thing to do now," I replied, "is for you to let me accompany you back to your home. They will make no further attempt to meet you this evening, since my presence has spoiled their plans. Come, let me escort you, Miss . . ."

As I hesitated over the name she answered simply:

"Bradford—Barbara Bradford."

She pondered for a moment over my suggestion and then turned to walk with me toward the apartment house.

"What were the men like?" she asked.

I described them as best I could, though really the impression that the youth on the bench had left was vague. His voice, an insolent, hoarse, uncultivated one, was almost all I could recall about him.

"They could not be any people I know," she said doubtfully.

"Of course not," I assented.

"I wonder who they were? I wonder how they knew?"

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"Knew what?"

Her lips tightened into a straight line.

"I can't tell you. I daren't. It isn't my secret."

By this time we had reached her home and the bowing doorman was swinging back the great iron door for us. It had been my intention to announce my arrival, but recalling that Miss Bradford had said that the Gaston apartment was on the same floor as hers, I stepped with her into the elevator. When it had descended, leaving us together in the corridor, she turned to me and offered her hand.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Nelson."

"I wish you'd let me help you," I cried.

She hesitated as if debating the matter in her own mind and then observing that all this time I had been holding her hand, she withdrew it quickly, blushing, and shook her head.

"Well, promise me one thing," I insisted.

"What is it?"

"That you never again will go alone to the Park to meet those men."

A tremor shook her body, and once more a look of terror crept into her eyes.

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"I can't promise that. I must meet them. I must! I must!"

I reached out and took her hand again.

"Promise me then that before you go again you will let me know."

"You must not try to stop my going," she cried desperately and freeing her hand turned quickly and unlocking her door left me standing there alone, staring after her.

Perplexed beyond measure as to what I ought to do, after a moment I pressed the bell and was admitted to the Gaston apartment and to the presence of my aged relatives.

Although I tried to pretend an interest in their conversation and absently answered their questions about my family, my thoughts kept constantly recurring to the strange trouble of the girl across the hall, her plight interesting me far more than the purpose for which my great-uncle had sent for me. I had expected that he would broach that subject himself, but the coffee arrived and still the conversation had been limited to stilted family chat. As we returned to the living room, I decided to give him a lead:

"My mother wrote me ——" I began.

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"Oh, yes," said old Rufus, looking relieved.

"Yes, yes, of course," echoed Mrs. Gaston.

I waited for one or the other of them to proceed but for some reason they both seemed at a loss for words.

"You tell him, Rufus," said my great-aunt at last, as I looked from one to the other inquiringly.

His tired old eyes studied my countenance carefully, searchingly as if he was trying to read my soul.

"What is it?" I asked impatiently.

"It is this," said old Rufus, speaking slowly and with effort, as if he hated to disclose his intentions. "Three days from now—that will be Sunday morning—my wife and I are going to Maine to be gone for some months. We have leased a furnished cottage there and shall take our servants and our motor with us. We do not like to leave this apartment wholly untenanted, and it occurred to Mrs. Gaston that you might occupy it in our absence."

I am afraid my countenance at that moment must have betrayed my consternation. My great expectations vanished, blew up, disappeared.

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They did not want me for an heir but for a caretaker. What a fool I had been to imagine for one moment that this penurious old couple had contemplated doing anything for me. They wanted me to do something for them. They planned to use me as a convenience—to get a watchman for nothing. A sarcastic refusal of their proffer trembled on my lips but was stayed by my great-aunt speaking:

"It will enable you to save your room rent. Mr. Gaston will pay the rent in advance before we go. There will be no one here to serve your meals so you will have to get them elsewhere, but I will arrange with my laundress, a trustworthy woman I have employed for many years, to come in once a day to make up your room, and you'll be under no expense."

Her suggestion that I would have no room rent to pay decided me. With a smaller budget it would be easier for me to save money and pay off my debt. Two other considerations also influenced me. It might be a plan on the part of the old people to try me out and see if I was trustworthy, and then, dwelling under the same roof with Barbara Bradford, I might have op-

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portunities of seeing her again, and who knows, perhaps of assisting her out of her mysterious plight.

"I shall be very glad indeed to come," I found myself saying. "It was nice of you both to think of me."

"There was no one else," said my great-aunt, with candor.

"We'll consider the matter settled," announced old Rufus. "We are unused to guests here, so you had better come at ten on Sunday, an hour after we have started. I shall give you tonight a duplicate set of all our keys."

"Rufus," suggested my great-aunt apprehensively, "had you not better give him the combination of the wall safe, too? My jewels are there, and in case there should be a fire ——"

"Why not take them with you?" I interrupted.

"They are a nuisance when you are traveling," she objected.

"A safe deposit box would be better, then."

"No," said old Rufus shortly. "Both my safe deposit boxes are full and there is no use hiring another one. The jewels will be all right

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where they are. In case of fire you can remove them to a place of safety. This is the combination—see that you remember it—six right, four left, two right, eight left, 6,428."

"I'll remember it," I replied, mentally repeating it over and over again.

"And now, my dear," said the old gentleman, "if you will get the keys from my desk, we can permit our nephew to depart."

My great-aunt left the room to do his mission. The minute she was safely out of hearing old Rufus's whole manner underwent a startling change. Into his deep-set gray eyes came a look of terror. He seemed all at once to have shrunk up into a weak, tired, terrified, childish octogenarian. His face became ashen, and the withered hand with which he clutched my arm was trembling violently.

"Listen, boy," he hissed, leaning forward that he might speak into my ear and looking about apprehensively as if he feared to be overheard. "Listen—there's something wrong here."

My first thought was that he had been suddenly stricken with senile dementia, but recalling his perfectly rational conduct throughout the

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rest of the evening, I dismissed the theory as absolutely untenable. His fear, whatever caused it, certainly seemed very real.

"Something wrong?" I repeated, wonderingly. "What do you mean? What is it?"

He clutched my arm in a still tighter grasp, and his voice, suppressed to a terrified whisper, became more insistent.

"Something wrong here—in this house—I tell you!"

"Wrong in what way?" I asked, puzzled by his manner.

"I don't know," he breathed. "I wish I did." He glanced timorously about and went on. "There's something wrong! I sense it. I feel it. I cannot find out what it is. All kinds of queer things happen. I am always hearing voices—whispers, whispers, whispers! That is why we are going away. My wife thinks it is on account of my health. I don't want her to know. Please, please, Spalding, find out what it is before we return. I have no son. There is no one else but you to do it. Solve the mystery for me. Find out about the whispers. Promise me you will. Ssh—not a word to her! Not a word!"

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"Something wrong here — in this house — I tell you!" *Page* 22

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He withdrew his hold on my arm and laid his finger on his lips as he heard his wife returning. With a visible effort he straightened up, and when she entered the room he apparently had entirely recovered his self-possession and was his natural self again, a dignified, world-weary old man. Even in his eyes there was no trace of the panic of senseless fear that had so recently possessed him.

"I can't find your keys, Rufus," said my great-aunt, "you had better get them yourself."

The minute he left the room she hastened to my side and she, too, began to whisper mysterious warnings, exhibiting a terror hardly less than her aged husband's.

"This is a house of mystery," she announced. "I'm always hearing strange sounds, here. He doesn't know"—with a nod in the direction old Rufus had gone, "and I do not want him to. That is the reason I am taking him away. All sorts of things happen in this house—things nobody can explain. Solve the mystery of it before we return. I'll pay you. I'll make it well worth your while."

Her husband's shuffling in the passage warned

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her of his return, and she quickly dropped my arm. As he entered she was telling me in quite normal tones to be sure to remember her to my mother the next time I wrote.

Old Rufus handed me the keys, explaining which was which.

"The laundress has a key to the servants' entrance," his wife added, "so you will not have to bother to admit her."

"And remember," said my great-uncle, as he escorted me to the door, "you are not to come until Sunday morning at ten, after we have gone. And remember the combination of the safe—Remember!"

The insistent way in which he repeated the word conveyed to me forcefully that what he most wanted me to remember was the strange warning he had given me, and as I clasped his hand in parting I tried by the firmness of my grip to let him know that I understood.

"Remember," repeated my aunt, too, as she stood there in the door a little behind him, at the same time giving me a significant look.

Yet, puzzling as had been the conduct of both of them, my memories that night were not of

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their warnings nor of the combination of the safe nor of the hour at which I was to arrive. They were of the most beautiful eyes I ever had seen and of the haunting terror written in them.

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CHAPTER II

SUNDAY morning came at last.

It was hardly eight when I set out for my new quarters, taking with me only one small hand-bag and leaving my two trunks for the express-man. In the time intervening since my visit to the Gaston home I had done but little except speculate on the mysterious warnings that both of the old people had surreptitiously given me. Time and again I had tried to persuade myself that the only logical explanation of their conduct was that they both were suffering from delusions due to senility. Medical history, I recalled, had recorded frequent instances where two persons closely associated suffered from a sort of sympathetic insanity and had the same vagaries. It seemed so utterly improbable and impossible that there could be any inexplicable mystery about a home in a modern, up-to-date apartment house in the center of a civilized city. And if there was a mystery, why did they stay there? Why didn't they move?

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Yet, as I pondered over the matter, I was convinced that both my great-uncle and his wife were rational. Save for that moment alone with each of them, their conduct had been entirely conventional. I dismissed without hesitation the theory that there could have been any supernatural happenings to affright them. I would have to see a ghost or a disembodied spirit before I believed there were such things. It was probable, I decided, that their fears might have been played on by some conspiracy on the part of their servants to induce them to spend a season in Maine. They perhaps had been annoyed by a series of odd sounds or strange noises, explicable by perfectly natural causes. Some such circumstance, preying on their aged nerves, might have driven them both to the verge of hysteria. Perhaps, too, there was some spectre from my great-uncle's past now rising to confront him that he was seeking to hide from his wife. It might be that she knew of it or had received threats and was trying to conceal the matter from him. There are few men of millions without some secret shameful pages in their lives. As I remembered that old Rufus

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Gaston's dollars had been made in South America, all that I had heard and read of plots and counter-plots below the Equator came buzzing into my brain. If such should be the case, that some betrayed conspirator now was seeking vengeance, more than ever I welcomed the unexpected chance that had thrown this opportunity for adventure in my prosaic path.

Yet maybe their warnings were justified. There was Barbara Bradford, who lived under the same roof, on the very floor with them. She seemed to be caught in the web of some plot, to be living in fear of some mysterious peril. Only some very real danger threatening could have driven a timid girl like her out alone into the Park to keep a rendezvous with two evil ruffians.

Was she, I wondered, in any way connected with the mystery that overhung the Gaston home? Did my great-uncle and his wife know her? Her mission to the Park had been to get some papers. Could they have been in any way involved with what was menacing my great-uncle's peace of mind? How I regretted now that I had not asked the Gastons if they knew

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Miss Bradford. How I welcomed the opportunity I was now to have of living in the same apartment house with her, close at hand if ever I could serve her. I was glad now that circumstances had prevented my going to France with Birge and Roller.

I had come down on the West side in a Broadway car as far as Fifty-ninth Street and I strolled leisurely back through the Park, entering by the Artisan's Gate at the Circle, musing over the sudden change in my life. It was barely nine when I emerged on to the Avenue, so to kill time I walked five or six blocks down and back. As I arrived at my great-uncle's corner, I saw Miss Bradford approaching from the opposite direction. She was in riding togs. Her cheeks were flushed from exercise, and the wind had blown her hair in pretty disorder about her face. I timed my steps to reach the corner as she did. Would she, I wondered, consider our strange meeting a few evenings before sufficient introduction to justify her speaking to me.

"Good morning, Mr. Nelson," she greeted me pleasantly. "Making an early call, aren't you?"

"I'm coming here to live for a while," I an-

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strange if they see me speaking to you. You understand, don't you?"

"But ——" I protested.

"No," she said firmly, "you must not speak to me or recognize me until ——"

"Until what?" I cried eagerly.

"Until we can manage to be properly introduced."

"Yet," I insisted, "you promised to let me help you. You promised not to go to meet those men again without letting me know."

"I have not forgotten. I'm grateful, really I am. Perhaps I may call on your services. I may have to. If I do, I'll find some way of letting you know."

"Some secret way," I suggested, half sarcastically.

"Perhaps," she laughingly nodded as we separated.

As I took out the keys my great-uncle had given me and entered the apartment, I looked about me with a wholly new interest. That little word "mine" makes a vast difference in the way we regard things. Now that these luxurious quarters were to be my home, temporarily

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at least, I looked about curiously. Certainly at first glance there was nothing mysterious in the atmosphere. Setting my bag down I began an immediate inspection of the rooms.

The Gaston apartment, I discovered, occupied one whole side of the sixth floor of a twelve-story building. Around the elevator shaft that came up through the center was a small square court with four doors, two opening into the Bradford apartment opposite and two into the one I was occupying. The east apartments were known as Six A and the west as Six B. The door by which I had entered led into a lofty foyer, connecting by sliding doors with a great dining room, and beyond it, in the front of the house, with a reception or living room that ran the entire width of the apartment. Back of the elevator, with a separate door for the servants' use, were the kitchen, the butler's pantry, a servant's sitting room and two bed-rooms. From the foyer a long hall ran almost the length of the building. On the servants' side it was blank as to doors, save for the passage from the pantry to the dining room, but on the other side several doors opened into spacious

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sleeping rooms, each with its own bath. At the far end of the hall was a small sitting room which I judged must be the favorite room of my great-uncle and his wife. Rufus's mahogany desk stood there, its pigeonholes crammed full of papers. Near by was a smaller desk, evidently my great-aunt's, for on it stood a sewing basket from which protruded some half-finished knitting. As I was wondering which of the bedrooms my great-aunt had expected me to occupy, I noticed still another door which I found led into a small bedroom on the servants' side of the house but unconnected with their quarters. While it was less elaborately furnished than the rooms opposite, it was comfortable enough, and it had a spacious bathroom adjoining. The fact that the bed here had been left turned down was evidence enough that it was intended for my occupancy. Returning to the foyer to get my bag and unpack it, I was startled by the ringing of the front doorbell.

I sprang eagerly to answer it. It must be Miss Bradford. Probably she had reconsidered and had decided to take me into her confidence. Who else could it be? There was no one else

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who knew I was in the apartment. The attendants on the main floor had seen me come in with Miss Bradford on the two occasions I entered and would have no reason for not supposing I was stopping with the Bradfords. My trunks were still to be delivered, but it was impossible for them to have followed me so quickly. It must be Miss Bradford!

With an exclamation of welcome on my lips I flung open the door. A man stood there—an utter stranger. In my disappointment I was almost closing the door in his face, but as if anticipating my thought he quickly advanced one foot over the sill and kept it there.

"Well," I demanded, almost savagely, "what do you want?"

"Oh, it is you, is it?" he replied, eying me with what seemed to me a most insolent stare.

"What do you mean?" I asked, bewildered. Certainly I never had seen this person before. He was short and stocky, with sparse nondescript hair and weak shifty blue eyes. His face had an unhealthy pallor, as if he had lived long away from the sunlight, and was sunken in as if from undernourishment, yet the breadth of

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his shoulders and his huge rough hands seemed to indicate physical strength beyond the ordinary.

"You're Mr. Spalding Nelson, aren't you?"

"That's my name," I answered shortly.

"Mr. Gaston's ——" He paused, as if trying to recall the relationship.

"Mr. Gaston's great-nephew."

"I guess you are him, all right," he said, in a manner of evident relief. "I'm Mr. Wick, the superintendent of the house."

"Of course," I answered, feeling rather foolish at my own vexation.

"Mr. Gaston told me you were coming in this morning," he hastened to explain. "He said he had left instructions for you not to arrive until ten o'clock, but that probably you would hardly wait until he was out of the house."

"Is that so?" I sniffed, indignant at my uncle's having foretold my actions so well.

"He gave me a description of you," Mr. Wick went on, unperturbed, "and the boys in the hall were pretty sure it was you that came in, but ——"

"But what?"

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"I couldn't understand it. You didn't announce yourself. It seemed funny, your coming in with the young lady from next door."

"It just happened that way," I explained, now understanding his mystification. "I met her as I was coming in."

"Twice," he said, rather insolently.

"I can't see that it is any of your business," I retorted angrily, "if it happened a dozen times."

His manner at once became apologetic, and he hastened to offer obsequious explanations.

"Mr. Gaston asked me to take particular notice. The other evening when you were coming to dinner he told me to tell the hall boys to look at you closely so that they could identify you as the right party when you came in today. That was how it happened. You see, sir, in a house of this sort we have to be careful. Tenants go away leaving all sorts of valuables lying around, and it doesn't do to let strangers prowl about without finding out who they are and what they are doing."

"Quite a proper precaution," I admitted.

"The elevator boy reported your arrival," he continued, "but he wasn't quite sure it was you.

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The fact that you were chatting with the young lady bothered him, and me, too. Mr. Gaston told me you were a stranger in the city, and I didn't expect to find you knowing one of the Bradfords."

It was on the tip of my tongue to say, "Well, you see I do know her," when I recalled her request that I would not recognize her until we had been introduced in some fashion. I contented myself with saying merely: "Well, I hope you are satisfied now."

"Of course, Mr. Nelson, of course," he answered, though his looks belied his words. Manifestly he was still puzzled over my acquaintance with Miss Bradford and would have liked to ask further questions, but I had no intention of satisfying his curiosity.

"I hope you will find it comfortable here," he said, plainly trying to continue the conversation. "If there's ever anything the matter, just call me on the house 'phone; Mr. Wick, the name is."

"I will," I said, and he unwillingly withdrew.

"If there's ever anything the matter . . ."

Was there something sinister in the superin-

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tendent's parting remark? Once more the warnings of my relatives flashed into my mind. What was wrong in the house? Why did he anticipate that I might be calling him up? Why did he exhibit such an interest in me and in my acquaintance with the girl across the hall? Certainly the precautions he had taken to ascertain my identity were justifiable, particularly in view of my great-uncle's instructions to him, but somehow the man's whole aspect had impressed me unfavorably.

I carried my bag back to my bedroom and unpacked it. The various attachments in the bath looked so inviting that I stripped and amused myself for half an hour testing the variety of showers and sprays provided. Donning my bathrobe I leisurely smoked an excellent cigar from a box old Rufus had thoughtfully—or perhaps thoughtlessly—left open on his desk, and then returned to the inspection of my new quarters.

As it was Sunday, I had a whole day of leisure before me, and I felt that if I was to clear up the mystery that had driven the old couple out, it was incumbent on me to make a minute study of

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my surroundings. There were plenty of pictures about, both paintings and etchings, but they showed little individuality in taste. More than likely, I decided, they had been supplied by the decorators who had provided the rest of the furnishings. Only in the little rear sitting room was there any atmosphere of hominess. All the rest of the place was done in the best department-store style, even to the richly bound sets of standard authors which lined the walls of the living room, most of which I found had their pages uncut. On some shelves in the sitting room were perhaps a hundred volumes that gave evidence of use. Most of them were novels of the trashiest sort, and all of them seemed to have in their title some reference to gold or money. Plainly my great-uncle's selection of fiction was governed by what had been the absorbing passion of his life—money, money, money.

My search of the place—and it was thorough, extending even to the empty canisters in the pantry and kitchen—revealed nothing whatever that gave any hint as to the cause or explanation of old Rufus's fears. The place seemed the least likely of all places in the world to hide any

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mystery, just a great, modern, luxurious apartment, equipped with every possible device for the comfort and convenience of its occupants; refrigerating pipes, electrical appliances of all sorts, windows that revolved inward to permit their being cleaned, convenient bells everywhere to summon service. It would have to be an up-to-date ghost to find itself at home here.

But wait! Perhaps the safe held some clue to the problem they wanted me to solve. But where was the safe? I had not noticed it anywhere in my repeated journeys through the rooms. I made another tour looking for it, carefully examining the panels of the dining room and living room, sounding the walls of the bedrooms, looking behind pictures, peering into clothes closets, even inspecting the bathrooms. More than likely it had been located in some inconspicuous place purposely. But where? At last I located it, behind a faded crayon portrait of Mrs. Gaston, in the little sitting room.

I lifted the picture to the floor and stood hesitant before the safe. Should I, or should I not, open it? The fact that they had given me the combination seemed to imply that I had a

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perfect right to inspect its contents. I had a natural inclination against prying, and yet, if there was something wrong about the place, surely I was justified in inspecting the treasure that had been left in my care.

"Six to the right, four to the left, two to the right, eight to the left."

As I turned the knob I repeated the combination to myself. There was a little click, and the steel door came open. Reaching in I drew forth two old-fashioned jewel cases of leather, both securely locked. I took from my pocket the keys my great-uncle had given me and toyed with them thoughtfully. Among them were two tiny keys that undoubtedly belonged to the jewel cases. Had I the right to use them? I decided that I had.

The first case I opened contained, so far as my limited knowledge of precious stones enabled me to judge, nothing but a bunch of cheap junk, bits of finery from another century, coral earrings that Mrs. Gaston may have worn when she was a little girl, combs of jet, amber beads, quaint hoop earrings and a ring or two, merely the trinkets of a vain old woman, treasured from

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the time when the money to buy them was scarce. There was nothing in the lot that any self-respecting thief would take, precious as they may have been to their owner. I locked up that case and returned it to the safe and opened the other.

As I raised the lid an involuntary exclamation of amazement and admiration escaped me. There, nestling in the center of a velvet-lined tray, lay gleaming the most wonderful mass of iridescent pearls I ever had laid eyes on. Tenderly I lifted them up, a double string of perfectly matched shining globules, surely worth a vast fortune. Turning them over and over admiringly in the light, at last I laid them back in the tray and began to investigate the other treasures the casket contained. In other trays in the box I found diamonds galore, a great solitaire that must have been all of seven carats, dinner rings, bar pins, crescents, stars, earrings, and in a compartment all by itself, a tiara of rubies and diamonds. There was also a variety of other gems, pins and rings wrought in curious designs with rubies, diamonds, sapphires, and pearls, some unset diamonds and loose fragments of

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pieces that had evidently been torn apart to add to other settings, the collection of a woman with unlimited money to spend.

With trembling hands I restored the jewels to their hiding-place, twice testing the knob to make sure that the combination had set. The unexpected sight of such a vast fortune in gems had filled me with strange emotions, with thoughts so evil I hardly dared admit them to myself. There must have been nearly half a million dollars' worth of precious stones in that one casket. The Gaston pearls in themselves were a fortune.

If only they were mine!

To every honest man at times come temptations as great as come to any criminal. No man knows whether or not he is honest until he has been put to the test. *I know!* I was tempted, strongly tempted, to take my great-aunt's jewels. What was to hinder? The old couple were to be absent for months. They had left me in charge and had given me their keys and the safe combination. There would be abundant time for disposing of the jewels before their theft was discovered. With the money they would bring

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I could satisfy my craving for adventure. I could travel the world over.

Yet, as I look back at it, all the time I was thinking these thoughts, I knew I would not take the jewels. A normal man cannot steal. Generations of honest ancestors bequeath him an honest body and a balanced brain. Even when his desires lead him to theft, his mind points out the folly and his conscience the wrong.

Resolutely I put the thought of the jewels out of my head—or tried to—and stretching myself out on a couch gave myself up to pleasant reveries about my delightful new acquaintance, the girl who lived just across the hall. I wondered what dire necessity had forced her to surreptitious meetings with strange men. I pictured myself finding some way of winning her confidence and of helping her out of her mysterious trouble. And what if eventually old Rufus should make me his heir? Surely I would need a mate with whom to share the joys of having a fortune. With visions of Barbara Bradford bedecked with my great-aunt's choicest jewels, I fell asleep.

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It was almost dusk when I was awakened by the arrival of the expressman with my trunks. After I had receipted for them and had unpacked, I suddenly realized that I was hungry, for I had eaten nothing since breakfast. Hastily I donned my clothes, stopping only to count my money. With a week's salary in my pocket and no room rent to pay for several months, surely I could afford a good dinner to celebrate the change in my fortunes.

As I went out I stopped in the lower hall to chat with the telephone girl, ostensibly to ask her to take any messages for me, though I was expecting none.

"You're Mr. Nelson, ain't you?" she asked, eying me with curious interest.

"Yes," I replied, "Mr. Spalding Nelson. I am occupying the Gaston apartment while they are away."

A flicker of amusement crossed her face, with just the suggestion of a sneer.

"I hope you'll enjoy living here."

"Why not?" I replied carelessly. "If any one calls, say that I will be home by ten, Miss ——"

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"Nellie Kelly," she added.

As I chatted with her the elevator had descended again, and three persons emerged, one of them being she for a sight of whom I had been intentionally loitering. One of the two persons with her was plainly the mother and the other I took to be an older sister. She resembled Barbara strongly, but there was a world-weary look in her face, and her beauty seemed to me to be marred by a weak, sensitive, passionate mouth. But I had no eyes for her, so absorbed was I in the appearance of the girl I had met in the Park. If I had thought her beautiful then, she was ravishing now. Her raven hair was piled high and caught back with a great Spanish comb. An ermine trimmed evening coat of brocade swathed her figure, opening at the front just enough to give me a glimpse of her bared white neck. Involuntarily my hand went to my hat, but into her eyes came a haughty look and one hand went to her lips for just a second, as if she were warning me again not to recognize her. I stood there abashed as she swept by me to the waiting motor. The telephone girl's voice jarred me back to my senses.

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"I thought you was a friend of the Bradfords," she said sarcastically.

"Sure he is," said the voice of Mr. Wick behind me. "Didn't you hear the boys telling me he came in twice with Miss Bradford?"

"Well, what of it?" I answered lamely and fled from the house, indignant at this open prying of the employees into my affairs, yet entirely at a loss to know how to stop it. How could I tell them I knew Barbara Bradford, when she had just cut me dead?

Feeling vaguely dissatisfied with my first day in my new home, I boarded a 'bus and rode down town to a little French café, where my comrades and I had been accustomed to go when we were in funds. Though my *émince Bernard* and my Burgundy were fine, I felt too lonely to enjoy them. All about me were merry Sunday-evening dinner parties, and I was alone. Birge and Roller had gone, and Miss Bradford had refused to recognize me. I hurried through my dinner, paid my check, and was leaving the restaurant when at a corner table I spied the scar-faced man whom I had seen in the Park a few evenings before.

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I stopped short and stared at him and at the flashily dressed woman with him. Who were they? In what way did they figure in Barbara Bradford's life?

He looked up and caught my glance. Into his face came a strange expression, a look of malignant hate, not unmingled with fear. Boldly I returned his gaze. I was tempted to walk right up to him and ask him what he had been doing in the Park, and why he had warned his mate away when he saw me there. Yet I had no right to interfere. Miss Bradford had not taken me into her confidence. I had only suspicions to go on that the two men had been there to attempt some wrong on the girl.

Slowly I left the restaurant, puzzled more than ever by the malevolent glance he had given me, and perplexed as to how I was going to serve Miss Bradford, when she would not even recognize me.

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CHAPTER III

MY great-aunt's pearls were gone—stolen—vanished from the wall safe!

Still discrediting the evidence of my own eyes, I lighted a match and peered into the steel-lined recess. It was empty. On the table beside me was one of the two jewel boxes it had contained, the one filled with worthless trinkets. The other, which had contained the priceless Gaston pearls and the other rich treasure, had vanished.

Today was Saturday. Six days before I had arrived in the apartment. There had been two jewel cases then. With my own hands I had put them both back safe in their hiding-place. I recalled having tested the knob to make sure that the combination had set. Yet since that time some one had opened the safe. Some one had removed the jewels. Who could it have been?

To the best of my knowledge there had been but two persons in the rooms, old Mrs. Burke,

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my aunt's trusted laundress, and myself. Certainly I had not taken the jewels, and it seemed absurd to suspect Mrs. Burke, who had been in Mrs. Gaston's employ for years and had long been entrusted with a key to the servants' entrance. Yet who else was there to suspect?

Recovering a little from my bewilderment I hastened to the telephone. I must notify the superintendent and also the police that the apartment had been robbed. I decided, too, that I should wire my great-uncle Rufus of the robbery, and then it dawned on me for the first time that I did not know the old couple's address. They merely had said that they were going to Maine, though by what route or to what destination I had not been made aware. Never mind, there was nothing that they could do in their absence. Probably I could get their address from the superintendent, or from Mr. Gaston's bankers. It would be time enough to notify them if it proved that the jewels were hopelessly gone. The first thing to do was to notify the superintendent.

But wait! With my hand on the telephone, I stopped short. It dawned on me that in all

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