The BIGAMIST

John Jay Chichester

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A Detective Story

BY

JOHN JAY CHICHESTER

Author of "The Porcelain Mask"

CHELSEA HOUSE

79 Seventh Avenue New York City

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The Bigamist

(Printed in the United States of America)

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To my editor and my friend,
FRANK ENGS BLACKWELL
whose wise and patient counsel has meant so much to this book and to me.

THE AUTHOR.

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CHAPTER I

MOONLIGHT

LIFE had suddenly become a miracle to Channing Searles. In the passing of a few swift weeks he had attained his most roseate dreams of opulence, although not according to any of the nebulous plans which his fancy had devised. This realization of his ambitions had not been, as he had wanted it to be, the earned fruits of his own endeavors. Attainment, yes; but not achievement. Chance had been the generous necromancer—chance, abetted by a woman.

While luxury had become an actuality, Channing Searles could not master the feeling that it was a dream—that the great house, with its wide sweep of lawn sloping sharply down to the water's edge in a series of landscaped terraces; the great, somber dining room, Italian in motif; and the butler and second man, who made him exceedingly nervous and ill at ease—everything that went with the scale of living, even the woman who had become his wife, would presently dissolve, as all dreams do, and that he would find himself back at Mrs. Chubb's boarding house.

From Mrs. Chubb's to this—what an amazing transition! Channing Searles' thoughts often went

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back to Mrs. Chubb's, sometimes shudderingly, and at other times, when something happened to torture him with a sense of inferiority, almost regretfully. At Mrs. Chubb's he *had* been superior.

Mrs. Chubb, who had seen better days, harassed by an endless stream of bills always overdue; trying to pretend that running a boarding house was a lark; that she enjoyed being "a business woman;" making up stories about rich family connections and repeating without conviction that she "loved her independence."

Miss Chamberlin, eighteen or nineteen, from Dekalb, Illinois, who had come to New York for a literary career, loftily proclaiming her scorn for those who "wrote down to a common level." She would never sacrifice *her* talents upon the altar of Mammon; she would work with her hands first, and she eventually did.

Mr. Holcomb, who went strolling Sunday afternoons in a silk topper; who spoke grandly, but vaguely, of Wall Street; and who was always explaining, rather defensively, that he had given up rooms at one of the good hotels because he preferred a "home atmosphere."

It had seemed to Searles that all of Mrs. Chubb's paying guests were pretenders, and not very good pretenders, either. Ed Hinkle was the one exception, attempting no stupid alibis for his frequent state of indigence; and yet there were times when it might have been suspected that even Hinkle's frankness was not one hundred per cent.

Rather a queer one was Hinkle, cynical and cal-

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lous to the finer things of life, as lazy as they come, and, to take the man's own word for it, not much burdened with scruples. He readily admitted his willingness to turn his hand to anything within legal limits; he even confessed that if he found a game worth the candle, he might take a chance on going to jail. Upon occasions he was in funds, and he was not always communicative about the source.

At Mrs. Chubb's, Searles, too, was somewhat of a pretender, being not unwilling that the others should think him greater than he was, although it was by his manner and not through any vain boastings that he fostered this impression. Being a lawyer, he considered it only proper that he should adopt a certain dignity of bearing which might be called "the legal manner." He had great fluency of speech and a trick of turning commonplace phrases into the dramatic. He was not handsome; but, better than that, he had "a strong face" and a pair of expressive eyes which leaped into a quick, fervid flame when he talked.

A strange mixture was Searles; when he could give himself free rein he became a dynamic personality; but underneath it all there was what the Freudians call "an inferiority complex." There were times when it submerged him entirely; perhaps this was one reason why he had made no progress with Platt, Hornaday & Platt, the law firm with whom he had obscure employment.

Thursday morning—this particular Thursday morning—dawned with no outward signs of significance; it was very much like the two previous

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Thursday mornings when Channing Searles had awakened to the persistent strangeness of this master bedroom, the massive four-poster bed and the soft crinkle of his silk pyjamas.

It was a balmy morning; the French windows, open, looked out upon the perfect green of the lawn, with stone steps dropping through the terraced levels to the river. The water was very placid this morning, although, shimmering and dancing in the warming sunlight, it seemed fairly alive with motion. On the rail of the balcony, just outside the windows, a sparrow looked in upon him inquisitively and took sudden wing as Searles tossed back the linen sheets.

The door between Searles' bedroom and that of his wife was closed. He slid his feet to the floor and, almost stealthily, crept across to the entrance of his own bath. What a relief it would be to draw his own water again, to get into his clothes without the assistance of a servant. It was evidently earlier than his usual hour for rising, for Kendricks, the second man, and who also valeted him, had not put in an appearance.

Searles had discovered that it took more courage than he possessed to make it clear that he *preferred* to shave his own face and put the buttons in his own shirts; that he resented this invasion of his privacy. Perhaps he would get accustomed to it in time; he *had* to fall into these luxurious ways. This was now his life; he had become the master of this house.

This morning he had awakened, as he usually

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did, with his thoughts turned back to Mrs. Chubb's. And from Mrs. Chubb's it was but a brief mental step to the picturesque hills of New Hampshire. Beautiful hills! But life had not been beautiful; it had been hard. He was thinking now, miserable with torturing guilt, of Dora Oakes.

"I must write that letter," he said aloud, as he turned on the tap. "I can't put it off any longer. I will write it to-day."

There came before him a picture of Dora's face, strained and ashen with incredulous horror, hurt as no man likes to hurt a woman, as she read this letter he must write. No matter how thoughtfully he might choose his words, they would be brutal.

He could see her running up the lane from the R. F. D. box, with the letter in her hand. She would not open the envelope until she had come to the great pine tree just beyond the edge of the clearing. This was her love's sanctuary; she always went there to read what he wrote her. She would tuck herself comfortably on the soft, springy couch of pine needles. She would slit the flap of the envelope with a hairpin and pout bewitchingly because the letter was so flat and stingy. And then—then she would read. All the happiness would leave her eyes The pages would flutter from her hands. As she sobbed, the great pine would whimper softly with her, as the breath of the wind stirred its aged branches.

Searles lifted his head and found himself staring at his own blurred reflection in the bathroom mirror. His clenched hand whipped out, and his

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knuckles cracked sharply against the silvered plate glass.

"You cad!" he shouted, his voice rising above the splashing water. "You contemptible, self-centered cad! You think you've made something of yourself, don't you? You think you *are* somebody now! You wanted to wallow in money, like a fat hog wallowing in the mud. You got your chance to get it, and now—now you've got it. Oh, Lord, what a price to pay!"

This was not the first time he had accused himself, but never before had he been so violent. His outburst of self-stigmatizing passion spent itself quickly, leaving him ashamed of himself for this surrender to the melodramatic. He had completed his morning's toilet when there was a rap at the hallway door, and, in response to his grumpy, "Yes, come," Kendricks entered the bedroom, an expression of surprise on his face.

"You did not ring for me, sir?" Kendricks' tone was reproachfully accusing.

"Haven't I got a right to dress myself if I happen to feel like doing it?" snapped Searles. "Get out and let me alone."

"Yes, sir; quite so, sir," murmured Kendricks, but he was unable completely to mask his disapproval of his new master.

He gave voice to this disapproval some minutes later downstairs, speaking to Hedges, the butler. "There ain't nothin' so pitiful, Mr. Hedges," said Kendricks, "as a man tryin' to convince people he's

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a gentleman and born to the purple. Sure now, Mr. Hedges, I'm as good an American as anybody, and I've got no objection to a man bein' plain in his tastes, but—well, there's the new master. A fish that's got into the wrong brook, an' no mistake."

"It will probably take Mr. Searles no longer to become a passable gentleman than it has taken you to become a passable second man," responded the butler. "It has been my observation that Mr. Searles is doing very well indeed—ah—considering. Some never get the trick of it, but he'll learn. Mr. Searles is no man's fool."

"I'll admit he was smart enough to marry a rich woman, but the puzzle of it to me, Mr. Hedges, is that she took him. She's never been the kind to jump at a man. Women is a riddle, ain't they?"

"Yours is a universal mistake, Kendricks," the butler said, with an air of profundity. "Man has endowed the female of the species with mystery. There is no mystery, none at all. I have made a study of women; I know them better than they know themselves."

"I didn't know you was a married man, Mr. Hedges."

"Not at present, Kendricks. I have been married three times, and I doubt if I shall be again. Oh, I had my illusions once. I assure you I had them, but courtship lost its flavor when I discovered that, instead of courting, I was being courted. And that is just the point I am getting at."

The second man, being none too nimble of wit,

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wrinkled his shallow forehead and blinked slowly, as he always did when he was puzzled.

"You mean, Mr. Hedges——"

"We will cite the case you have mentioned, that of our master and mistress. You say he married *her*. It doesn't occur to you that she married him? Well, she did. All women do. Yes, indeed.

"Was it King Solomon who chased after the Queen of Sheba? It was not. She made up her mind to get him before she ever so much as put eyes on him. And didn't Cleopatra roll herself up in a rug so she could crash in on Mr. Cæsar and show him what a great looker she was? Answer me that, Kendricks!"

"I—I ain't much on hist'ry," stammered the second man, overwhelmed, as he always was, by his superior's erudition; "but Mr. Searles, you can take it from me, was lookin' for somethin' soft. He seen his chance to grab off an heiress, and he took it."

"Maybe he thinks he did; but a woman marries a man because she wants him—either the man or something he's got. It may be his looks, his money, his title, or social position; but it's the woman who does the picking. We must agree that Mr. Searles had no money, no title, no social position; then she wanted *him*. She wanted him, and she got him."

"But *why* did she want him?" demanded Kendricks with a baffled gesture. "Tell me that!" His tone was a mixture of bewilderment and challenge.

"There goes the bell!" exclaimed Hedges, hurrying to his feet, with what may have been unnecessary haste and smoothing down his waistcoat.

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Thereupon Kendricks came to the conclusion that the butler was hardly so wise about women as he so stoutly professed to be.

The second man was by no means the only person who had curiously put the same question. Why had Elizabeth Borland, rich and unimpulsive, married the poor young lawyer, probably two or three years younger than herself, whom she had known so short a time?

Her two nieces, certain that Aunt Elizabeth was a confirmed spinster, and, perhaps, thinking secretly that she did not look extra strong, bitterly charged Searles with some mesmeric power over her, branding him a scheming adventurer. The very fact that the engagement had been brief gave them further food for suspicion.

Channing Searles had been as bewildered as any one else. This Thursday morning, taking a nervous stroll along the upper terrace, awaiting breakfast time, it remained an unanswered query within his own mind. Obviously the explanation was that she had been in love with him, and yet what a strange love it was, undemonstrative, ardorless, just as their courtship had been.

Due to a law-school friendship, Searles had got a place in the office of the New York legal firm, Platt, Hornaday & Platt. It was a position of small importance, with a correspondingly small salary. He brought no business with him, and he had not been able to get ahead. The fault was not lack of ambition, for ambition burned at white heat within him.

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He had been twenty-five before entering college. It had taken him seven years to get his A. B. and law school degree. Those seven years had been a constant accumulation of debts, borrowing mostly from relatives who could not well afford to lend. Dora had let him have five hundred dollars to finish out his last year.

Then four years of paying debts, twenty-five dollars a month on this note one month, another twenty-five on that the next. A treadmill of debt! Dora had agreed with him that they must wait until he had cleaned the slate. She had waited eleven years—for this blow of disillusionment!

When he was just beginning to see his way out of the financial woods, the law firm had sent Channing Searles out to the Borland country house, in Westchester County, with some papers for Elizabeth Borland's signature. That had been their first meeting.

Strangely enough, Searles did not feel embarrassed with the rich Miss Borland. It might have been the cocktail which sharpened his wit to rapier point that evening. His conversational brilliancy had fascinated her; she found him a mental stimulus, little short of intoxicating. Not only did she ask him to come again, she urged him.

Searles had come again, not impelled by any scheming notions, but because it was immeasurably pleasing to find himself welcome in such an atmosphere. And then that evening upon the terrace, with a golden moon casting its mystic spell about

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them, soft beams of mellow light playing upon the surface of the river below.

The magic of nights like that does tricks with a man's mind and strange things to a woman's soul. Romance rides the moonbeams. Elizabeth Borland seemed touched by a fairy wand; white and slender she stood there, her face given a borrowed beauty, her features softened, and the whole of her enveloped in a subtle perfume. She was not Elizabeth Borland, but the creation of a beautiful fantasy.

Channing Searles was never able to explain to his own satisfaction how it happened. He had no conscious thought, as his arm went softly about her, and then in a sudden panic he realized what he had done, and it fell limp at his side.

"Forgive me," he said thickly. "I forgot myself."

Her hand went out, and her fingers rested across his; hers were trembling a little and cold.

"Forgive?" she said softly. "There is nothing to forgive, my dear. I love you—I love you!"

After that neither of them spoke; he was too dazed for words, and she was too enthralled. They only stood there by the stone parapet, her hand against his, the silence to her immeasurably sweet.

But for Searles the night's enchantment was broken; the poetry of the moonlight gave way to the harsh prose of practical things. A very rich woman had just told him that she loved him. Something Ed Hinkle had said to him back in Mrs. Chubb's boarding house flashed through his mind; it had not made much impression on him at the time, for Hinkle indulged in many extravagances of speech.

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"You'll never be much of a lawyer, Searles, but with your magnetism, your personality, your flow of words, you'd be a whiz in public life. When you turn on the oratory, you hypnotize 'em. Congress, the Senate, the presidency! If you had a chance, money, or some influential friends to give you a boost, there'd be no stopping you. It's a darn shame!"

It was a start he needed—a start on the road to the high places! And here it was for the taking. Searles could not remember everything that went on in his mind, but the picture of Dora Oakes, waiting for him with a patience which even eleven years of waiting could not tire, slipped far into the background. His arm went about Elizabeth again.

Until a day or so before the wedding—it was Elizabeth who wanted a brief engagement and a quiet ceremony—Searles kept up his correspondence with Dora, trying to pave the way and yet lacking the courage to put even a hint of it on paper. Perhaps, too, in the back of his head, was the thought that with Elizabeth it was only an emotional whim, and that, upon taking second judgment, she would probably declare the affair off.

This morning, less than three weeks after his marriage, thoughts of Dora Oakes haunted him with harrowing poignancy, although there had not been a day when she had not weighed heavily upon his mind. It had been almost three weeks since she had heard from him, and this unexplained silence must be filling her with dread alarms. There were no doubt letters from her at Mrs. Chubb's boarding

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house, frantic letters begging to know what was wrong. Instead of having his mail forwarded, he had dropped a note to Ed Hinkle, asking him to keep all letters until he called for them.

"I'll write to-day," Searles muttered, drumming his fingers against the rail of the stone parapet.

A step sounded on the walk behind him, and he turned. It was his wife. There were no soft lights and magic shadows to film her with an illusive glamour, and the mornings were never kind to Elizabeth. For the first few hours she had a tired, ill look, as if she had slept badly. Her skin had a touch of sallowness, her lips had little color, and she scorned rouge. Thin, repressed lips they were.

"Oh, Chan, isn't it a glorious morning?" she said, as she came beside him and slipped her fingers about his arm. Her voice did have beauty, a musical charm. "I saw you from my window, so I hurried."

"Yes, a glorious morning, Elizabeth." Searles compelled himself to smile.

They walked along the terrace, side by side, for half a dozen paces, when she paused, a touch of color mounting to her cheeks. He felt the pressure of her fingers on his arm.

"It was here, Chan, this very spot," she said, her voice low and hushed. "Oh, that wonderful night when you and I stood here alone in the moonlight. Do you remember?"

"Yes, Elizabeth, I remember. I shall always remember that night."

She had said the same thing, and he had made

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the same answer many times before; it had become a kind of ritual. She lifted her face to his, and their lips touched lightly.

Her kiss chilled him now, as it always chilled him, for each time he kissed her he thought of another kiss, warm, clinging, hungry; of a pair of velvety soft arms pressing about him in a passionate embrace, holding him close, very close, as if she wanted never to let him go. Even the memory of those other kisses, Dora's, electrified him.

Elizabeth, looking up into her husband's face, smiled gently.

"You do love me, Chan," she murmured; "you do love me so deeply, so finely." For she saw that his eyes had become moist. "Oh, Chan, I am so happy —happier than I ever dreamed I would be. The thought of love had always frightened me a little; I was afraid that I would find it a sort of tempest. I had not hoped to find it so tender, so sweet."

Channing Searles turned his head to keep her from seeing how utterly miserable he was.

"I think we had better go in to breakfast," he said, after a pause. "I must be at the office this morning, and that means the nine o'clock train."

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CHAPTER II

A TELEGRAM

ALTHOUGH Elizabeth insisted upon having him driven to New York in the open car—during breakfast she saw there was little color in his face, and she thought the fresh air would be about what he needed—Searles did take the train, as he had planned to do. It had been his intention to get off at One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street, taking a taxi to Mrs. Chubb's for his personal mail. Dora's letters he had decided to destroy unopened.

There was a congestion of traffic on the Harlem division this morning, with the result that he would not reach the Grand Central Station until after eleven, and the delay denied him any surplus of time. Conrad Hornaday, heading the law firm, was leaving for California on the Twentieth Century and wanted to see him.

"If you can find it convenient," Hornaday's note had said, a deference which Channing Searles understood perfectly. He had often imagined himself turning Conrad Hornaday's tart ungraciousness into respect, but, now that he had it, there was no expansive feeling of satisfaction. Rather it irked him with a tinge of bitterness. It was because, instead of being an inconsequential clerk, whose tasks were confined to inconsequential routine, a kind of glori-

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fied office boy, with his name stenciled in humbly small letters upon the door of a humbly small private office, he had become the husband of one of Platt, Hornaday & Platt's wealthy and lucrative clients. Reflected glory is always dull, with a disappointing tarnish.

The senior Mr. Platt, now past eighty, had withdrawn from active practice; the value of the junior Mr. Platt to the firm was neglible; and the burden of directing this highly efficient law organization fell upon the capable and willing shoulders of Hornaday, a tremendous worker, learned in the law and wise in the ways of turning it to the advantage of their clients. A brusque man by nature, he knew when to oil his tongue with diplomacy.

All the way in on the train Searles was thinking not of Hornaday and his own altered status at the office, but of the letter he must write. Fluent phrases usually came to him easily, but not now, as he tried to mold sentences which would hurt Dora the least. Perhaps it would have been easier had it not been that at the same time he was trying to excuse himself. He continued his groping for words, as he cut across the station rotunda to telephone to the office to say that he was on his way.

From north, west, and east, the traffic of New York empties itself into lower Broadway, a jamming mass and maze of automobiles, trucks and drays until the downtown thoroughfare is like a lumbering country river, choked at its mouth with timber. The tangle of vehicles, moving a few feet, spurting ahead when a clear space opens, makes

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one think of logs hopelessly clogged in a narrow stream on their sluggish journey to the sawmills. To get to the Battery in a hurry, a sensible man does not take a taxicab.

Being in a hurry, Searles used the subway—the shuttle to Times Square and a downtown express to Wall Street. After twenty minutes underground he had reached the tall, narrow building wherein the firm of Platt, Hornaday & Platt occupied an entire floor. This was the first time since his marriage that he had been in. Morning after morning, during his four years' employment here, he had passed through the office entrance, getting a perfunctory, chilling greeting, and often no greeting at all from Miss Robertson, who had become forty and forbidding in the service of Platt, Hornaday & Platt. Today she relaxed her thin, taut mouth into a cordial smile and bowed stiffly from the waist.

The office boy leaped to his feet and swung open the low gate of the office railing.

"Good morning, Mr. Searles!" They said it together, as if they might have rehearsed their greeting, and they stared at him, as if he were an interesting stranger they were seeing for the first time.

"Good morning, Miss Robertson! Good morning, Alfred," Searles responded rather absently. "Miss Robertson, please tell Mr. Hornaday I am here."

"He is expecting you, Mr. Searles; you are to go right in. It's a lovely morning, Mr. Searles."

"May I take your stick and hat, sir?" This eagerly and courteously from the office boy.

Channing took neither satisfaction nor amusement

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from this attention. It had scarcely any impression on him. Conrad Hornaday's office was at the front of the building, a private office within a private office, and Hornaday's very efficient secretary was stationed at her desk in the latter.

"Good morning, Mr. Searles!" She, like Miss Robertson, greeted him with a new effusiveness. "Step right in! Mr. Hornaday is waiting for you."

Searles opened the door and crossed the threshold. Hornaday stood before an open window, toying with the silk cord of his eyeglasses which he seemed to use principally for the purpose of making elegant gestures. He was a bulky man, with a florid, forceful face and thinning gray hair; encroaching baldness gave his forehead an appearance of amazing height.

"Good morning, Searles." His tone, as the other had expected, was most cordial. Hornaday would be cordial to the husband of a rich client, whether he felt like it or not. They shook hands, and Hornaday motioned the younger man to a chair beside the wide mahogany desk. "Sorry to drag you from the Garden of Eden, but, as I mentioned in my note, I start for California this afternoon. Wanted to have a talk with you before I left town."

"It's quite all right, Mr. Hornaday. I had intended coming in to-day, anyhow."

"Smoke?" The senior member of the law firm offered cigars. "I trust Mrs. Searles is in good health."

"Yes."

"A splendid woman, Searles—a woman of de-

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cided mental attainments. I congratulate you." Hornaday glanced at his watch. "Time is limited, and I'll come directly to the point. The firm trusts you have decided to remain with us."

This was precisely what Searles had expected. As a rough guess he had estimated that the handling of Elizabeth's legal business was worth many thousands a year to Platt, Hornaday & Platt. In addition to her own share of her father's fortune, she was trustee for a younger brother whose irresponsible character had caused a number of legal strings to be tied about his inheritance.

"I shall of course continue my profession," Searles answered. "I do not want to become a parasite."

"Splendid!" murmured Hornaday, his eyes upon the other's face, tapping the lens of his glasses against the pinkish surface of a freshly manicured thumb nail. "In that case, my dear Searles, there is no reason why you should not continue with us. You have been with this firm four years. You began at the bottom, have worked hard and faithfully, and have now reached a place where we can offer you advancement—material advancement." Trust Conrad Hornaday to put it tactfully.

"I have wanted to get ahead with your firm," said Searles, knowing full well the offer was made with no regard for his own merits as a lawyer. Hornaday wanted to keep the Borland business, and doubtless he considered the surest way to keep it was to keep Searles. "My salary has been so small, however, that I feared I might be forced to make a change.

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No self-respecting man likes to be dependent upon his wife's purse."

"The question of your future salary was the very matter I wanted to have settled before I left town. Your duties will, from now on, be of a more important nature. The figure I have in mind is ten thousand a year. Will that be satisfactory, Searles?"

"Quite satisfactory," he answered.

"Good! Until my return Mr. Framington will look after you; he will probably ask you to assist him with the Norcross case. Now about an office. You will have the junior Mr. Platt's room, and, I am sure, you'll find it comfortable. His name will remain on the door with yours, but he is much too busy winning golf trophies. He will not often intrude upon your privacy. The office arrangement meets with your approval?"

"Entirely so, Mr. Hornaday." Searles smoked for a moment in silence. Hornaday must know he was not such a conceited fool as to think these considerations were given him because of actual ability. Abruptly he leaned across the desk. "I should like to be frank," he blurted.

The other nodded, looking surprised and rather curious.

"I realize," said Searles, haltingly at first, but gathering earnestness as he spoke, "that there are certain considerations which enter into your generous offer and which do not take my ability into account. I want you to know I understood. I am accepting it because it is less humiliating to take money from Platt, Hornaday & Platt

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than to take it from my wife. Perhaps it amounts to the same thing fundamentally, but I want a chance, a genuine chance, to *earn* your ten thousand. I don't want to play at practicing law; I want to dig in and make good. I want to stand on my own feet."

A quizzical gleam shone briefly in Conrad Hornaday's eyes. He was thinking this might be a mere sop for Searles' self-respect, but he was not sure.

"Ah!" he murmured. "I hadn't expected you to feel this way about the—ah—arrangement; frankly, I hadn't. But I like you better for it. Humph! It's just possible we have kept you so buried with routine you haven't had a real opportunity; perhaps you *can* stand on your own feet. Anyhow, you'll get a chance." He looked at his watch. "No more time than I need to have my lunch and make the train. We shall get better acquainted, Searles, when I return from California." He offered his hand, and it seemed to Searles that there was more genuine warmth in the pressure of his fingers than there had been before.

An hour later Searles had completed the job of moving himself into his new quarters, this richly furnished office which the junior Mr. Platt, before that frivolous young man had discovered the practice of law would seriously interfere with the pursuit of his personal pleasures, had equipped with a lavish hand. It was a large, important-looking room, with a blue rug and a handsome mahogany desk and other appointments in keeping.

Channing Searles sat at the desk, a dictaphone at

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his elbow, a row of ivory push buttons within easy reach of his hand. An office like this had the natural effect of making a man feel important. He found it a pleasant sensation, but this soon passed. He slumped down in the swivel chair, his face mirroring the torture of a soul in chaos.

"Pretense!" he muttered. "All empty pretense. A bribe! That's all it amounts to—a common bribe. I am a cheap bribe taker!"

Presently he remembered the unwritten letter and, clamping his teeth, as if for a stupendous physical effort, drew a sheet of paper toward him, picked up a pen from the metal tray, and dipped it into the inkwell.

> DEAR DORA: No matter how much these words may cause you to suffer, you can know I am suffering, too. I have traded my dreams for a nightmare. Perhaps when you read on, when you discover how unlike I am to the man you have thought me to be, you will be glad——

Abruptly he stopped, tore the sheet twice across, and let the pieces fall into the wastebasket. He began again.

> DEAR DORA: An insane man is not accountable for his actions. There are times when ambition becomes insanity. I am just emerging from a horrible madness to find I have wrecked our happiness, mine as well as yours. For weeks I have been like one walking through a fog. Even now——

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The telephone tinkled merrily. Searles mechanically took down the receiver and mouthed a weary "yes" into the transmitter.

"Mr. Hinkle to see you, Mr. Searles," said Miss Robertson's voice. "He says he is calling on a personal matter."

"You may send him in," Searles told her and crumpled the second start of his letter between his fingers. He welcomed the interruption; it gave him excuse for further procrastination. Hinkle was a diverting fellow.

The door opened, and Ed Hinkle breezed into the private office, a Malacca stick with a gold band hanging from his forearm, his fedora slightly tilted toward his right ear, a carnation in the lapel of his coat, which was too loud for good taste. His mouth pursed into an admiring whistle, as he took in the room.

"Gosh, Chan, what a wow of a place you've got here! I take off my hat to you." He did literally.

"Hello, Ed," said Searles, putting out his hand. "Glad to see you."

"Dog-gone it, I believe you are, even if you have got out of my class." Hinkle dropped into a chair, tapping the ferrule of his stick against the sole of a spat-topped shoe. "This isn't much like the shoe box they had you in the last time I called to see Lawyer Searles. Looks like they've made you a member of the firm. Have they?"

"No, not a member of the firm, Ed. They've merely given me this office and ten thousand a year,

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and I would give it up this very minute, if I could——"

"Ha! *Merely* ten thousand a year! But, of course, since marrying a multimillionairess you have only scorn for *mere* thousands. Lord, you could have knocked me down with a humming bird's feather when I got back to Mrs. Chubb's and heard the news. You sure worked fast. Thick as you and I were, you didn't tell me you were planning——"

"It wasn't planned, Ed. It—well, it just seemed to happen. I met Miss Borland the same week you went away on your trip. The engagement was a brief one."

Hinkle winked owlishly. "Clever boy! Didn't give her a chance to change her mind. You sure used your head better than I would have given you credit for. I'd have made a ten-to-one bet you were the kind of sentimental ass who would pass up a rich chance for that pretty little trick you used to rave about, until I could almost choke you."

Searles flinched. "You are looking rather prosperous yourself, Ed."

"For yours humbly, Edward Theodore Hinkle—yes. I put over a little deal in Cleveland that put thirty-five hundred in the hip pocket. A bit shady, I'll admit, but strictly legal-proof. And, say, from the way you look, Chan, I'm having a darn sight more fun out of my piking thirty-five hundred than you are out of your millions. I'd have a smile as wide as Fifth Avenue—perhaps wider if I'd fallen into a soft thing like you have."

Searles' mouth twisted, as he gestured heavily.

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"Ed," he burst out, "I wish to the Lord I were back in the room down the hall that you call a shoe box. I would give ten years of my life if I were sitting across the table from you at Mrs. Chubb's to-night! What does it matter if a man's hands are filled, when—when his heart is empty?"

"You talk like an idiot! Why, you crazy fool, you've got everything you want."

"Except what I want most," Searles said thickly. "You call me a crazy fool—it's exactly what I am. What have I got? A wife whose kiss chills me, like the touch of ice to my lips; a fine house in which there is no comfort; I'm waited on by servants who have no respect for me; some money and this fine office, both of which are a bribe. I have lost my self-respect, and I have lost—her." His voice ended in a choking sound that was almost a sob.

Hinkle stared at him in uncomprehending amazement, and then he shrugged his shoulders. "The girl back in New Hampshire, eh? Oh, bosh! I can see you're still nutty about her, but you'll get over it."

"What about her?" thundered Searles, as if he were a lawyer pleading with a jury for his own conviction. "Do you realize what I have done to her? Do you realize she has loved me, trusted me, waited for me—eleven years? Have I ever told you it was her money that helped pay my last year through law school? Do you know it was she who fired me with my first ambition to make something of myself? Except for her, I would be back there

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in the mountains, working with my hands. Do you understand—working with my hands?

"You don't know what life is back there, Hinkle. There life is hard—as hard as the rocks that crop through the soil all over the farms which go tumbling up the hills and down; hard as the long winters which froze us in. No, I see you don't understand; you couldn't understand unless you had been through it, as I have been.

"She planted the seed of my ambition, and it has grown into a dirty, ugly weed. It would have been a kinder thing for me to have killed her. Pain ends when it is only the body that dies. Maybe you are wondering if I really feel this way about it, why I have done this damnable thing. I have already told you—it was madness! It began with madness—moon madness, and now I am sane again—too late."

Ed Hinkle shook his head. He considered that Searles was ridiculously maudlin.

"Oh, she'll get over it, Chan. It makes a girl mad as the very devil to have a guy throw her down; but she'd have left you waiting at the church, too, if she'd found a better chance. Surest thing in the world."

Searles shook his head pityingly. "It has never been your good fortune, Ed, to meet a woman like her. A woman who waits eleven years for a man is true—true as steel. And I—I am just putty."

"Putty's soft, huh? Well, you're soft, all right; a fool softy. You've done it, ain't you? Then forget it. Remember what I told you one night in my room? Not that I ever thought you would get a

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big chance like this. Gosh, no! I told you that if you had some coin, some influential friends to give you a boost, you'd be a knock-out in public life. You got to get into politics—that's what. Dog-gone you, when I was listening to you just now, you sort of had me hypnotized. With the way you've got of tossing the words around——"

Searles had forgotten that, but he remembered now. He also remembered that Hinkle's words had flashed through his mind the night he had stood with Elizabeth upon the terrace. Ambition, tempting him, had used Hinkle's words as bait. He took a step forward, his hands clenched, and his eyes were burning with such a passion of anger that the other scrambled to his feet in bewildered alarm.

"S-say, Chan!" he stuttered. "What's the matter with you, anyhow? What did I say to make you sore?"

Searles subsided, deeply ashamed of himself.

"I have no right to blame you, Ed. It is no fault of yours that some nonsensical thing you said during an evening's chat at Mrs. Chubb's became the turning point for me. A man likes to blame other people for his own folly. If I had the right stuff in me, it wouldn't have made any difference; nothing would have made any difference. I am a fool—and weak.

"We'll not talk any more about it, Ed. I've made myself a bed of thorns, and I've got to lie on it. It is only right *I* should pay the price for my own miserable selfishness, but what hurts the worst is

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knowing how much I've got to hurt her. She does not know. I haven't had the courage to tell her."

Hinkle completed the movement he had twice already made toward his pocket. In his hand was a telegram.

"This takes care of that end of it, Chan," he said. "Guess you won't have to tell her, and that's what seems to be bothering you most. I got your note, telling me to keep your mail, but, being a telegram, I thought maybe you ought to have it. You'll think I have a fat nerve, but the flap came loose, and I read it. If it wasn't important I wasn't going to bother about bringing it."

Searles' face became ghastly, and his fingers, snatching at the yellow envelope, were trembling.

"You mean," he cried thickly, "that she—that Dora is——" He choked over the dread word.

"She probably is by now," Hinkle answered. "You had better read it for yourself."

Tearing the folded paper from its envelope, Searles read with blurred eyes the terse typewritten lines.

Dora dying. You better come quick.

CALVIN OAKES.

How unsatisfactory is the average telegram, sacrificing everything for brevity, as if there might be an embargo on all words above ten. Calvin Oakes, with habitual frugality of speech, had confined himself to but six. He did not say if her condition were due to illness or an accident.

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"'Dora dying. You better come quick.'" Searles read it aloud, rather repeating it from memory. The paper crackled between his clenched fingers and fell to the rug at his feet, as he swayed against the support of the desk, like a man stricken with a heart seizure.

"Buck up, old man," Ed Hinkle said almost gently, even his cynical nature pierced by the depth of the other's grief. "Sit down, Chan, and pull yourself together. I didn't know it would hit you between the eyes like this."

"It tells so little," Searles said dully; "it tells so little when I want to know so much. I—I may be guilty of this. Three weeks since she has had any word from me. My silence may have worried her into a collapse. I—I have heard of brain fever from a mental strain.

"Were there no letters, Ed? There must be letters! Perhaps they tell something—give some news——"

"Yes, there were letters, half a dozen of them. I've got them in my pocket."

Searles took the packet of envelopes, his shaking hands sorting them clumsily. It might save time to open first the one with the latest postmark. All were addressed to him in Dora's small, firm script, except one. He recognized Calvin Oakes' labored, ragged handwriting.

Dora's brother had barely escaped illiteracy. Unlike his sister, he had no thirst for knowledge, no ambition beyond the sterile acres which he farmed after a slovenly fashion. There were many mis-

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spelled words, capitals where there should have been none, a confusing lack of punctuation. Searles read the letter with difficulty.

"She has been hurt, badly hurt," he told Hinkle in a strained voice. "This is from her brother. Like his telegram, it is brief and unsatisfactory. She has had some kind of a fall. Her spine—her back, Calvin puts it—has been injured. She is helpless and unconscious most of the time. She—she calls for me continually. The doctor says there is no hope; she may linger a little while, he thought at the time this letter was written, but a matter of days at most.

"It is three days since I should have known all this. Of course they cannot understand why I have not come to her. I—I hardly know what to do."

Ed Hinkle stirred uncomfortably. He could think of nothing appropriate to say. Searles' fingers strayed toward Dora's unopened letters, five of them; he touched them as if they were sacred. He would not attempt to read them now; he felt that they would break him down. On the desk was a clock, the hands marking half past two. Abruptly he rushed to his feet.

"I can just make it—the three o'clock train! There is a chance, the barest chance, that she may be alive when I get there. It will be something to see her again, to hear her speak my name, if I am not too late."

"You are going?" Hinkle said.

"Going? She is calling for me—she wants me!

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Going? Of course I am going. What else could I do?"

"Yes, I suppose so, Chan, since you feel the way you do about it. But haven't you forgotten your wife? Running off and leaving her so suddenly, married only three weeks—well, she might ask questions—she *might* insist on going with you."

Searles made no response. Crushing his hat on his head, he dashed out of the office, leaving Ed Hinkle to shift for himself.

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CHAPTER III

THE ODOR OF BALSAM

FROM the Grand Central Station, Channing Searles dispatched a wire to Calvin Oakes, naming the train and hour of his arrival, and then he telephoned Elizabeth. He told her hurriedly that "a very dear friend" was critically ill and had sent for him. A man engaged in a deliberate lie will sometimes cling conscientiously to the strict letter of truth.

Elizabeth did not complicate his explanation with questions. The tone of his voice told her he was deeply affected, and she was gently sympathetic. It was fine of him, she said, that he should be loyal to an old friendship. Of course she would miss him, but by all means he must go. He promised her he would return in two or three days, at most. No, it would not be necessary for her to write, for he would be back before any mail could reach him.

Travel was usually light on this train, but to-day there were members of some fraternal order, returning home from a lodge convention, and they had taken all of the Pullman space with the exception of a drawing-room. Searles, thrift born in him, as it is in so many New Englanders, and practiced under compulsion during the past eleven years, indulged in this extravagance only after some hesitation. Later he was very glad he had done so, for it

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gave him complete privacy at a time when he wanted to be alone—absolutely alone.

A long time after the train had entered Connecticut and had turned north from Hartford, he sat, dazed and motionless, his eyes fixed upon a flying landscape, endlessly unwinding ribbons of stone fences, trees, houses, and barns given the illusion of movement, none of which he noticed. He could think only of Dora Oakes and see only the pictures which his memory brought before him—pictures which were beautiful, except that his own unfaithfulness had made them ugly.

Just before dusk closed in, he remembered the letters in his pocket. Now he took them in his hands and sorted them according to the dates of the postmarks, deciding to read them in the order in which they had been written. The first, he noted, had been mailed at four p. m., the sixth of June—the day and the precise hour of his marriage to Elizabeth Borland. Searles shuddered and put the five letters back into his pocket without opening them. He had forfeited his right to read these pages, made sacred by her tender endearments.

But, after a time, when the outside light had become so dim that it strained his eyes to follow Dora's neat, closely penned script, he did read them. Only he reversed the order and opened the last letter first, the one written when it had been nearing two weeks since she had heard from him. He knew that her agonized apprehension over his unexplainable silence would stab him, like the thrust of a dull knife, through his heart; but he deserved

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to suffer, *wanted* to suffer, and hoped to find a small measure of atonement in it.

None but a woman who loved with every fiber of her being could have put into simple words such a passionate outpouring of anxiety. All sorts of panic-stricken thoughts went tumbling through her mind. She had no reproaches; she considered him incapable of any act which could warrant reproach.

> Yesterday I thought, for the first time, that you might be dead. The thought made me scream. Calvin came running from the barn lot, thinking I was hurt. If God took you away from me, I should feel there is no God.

Searles' very soul writhed. He had bartered away such a love as this! This, her last letter, the last letter she would ever write, ended with a piteous entreaty that he get some kind of a message to her. There were, too, some passages he could not understand, but, as he went on, from envelope to envelope, he found the explanation.

> Your last letters worry me a little. They contain a vague something I cannot grasp. I think it must be that you are becoming discouraged —that you are beginning to feel that you should get ahead faster. How *can* you say that you have no *right* to keep me waiting so long? My arms ache with emptiness. It has been hard, harder than you will ever know, for me to put off coming to you when I wanted you so hun-

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grily that I was ashamed; but, with all the debts to be paid, it would have been selfish for me to add to your burdens. And now, oh, my dear, I am ready to tell you my wonderful plan.

I have been taking a business course. In a few more weeks I shall be ready to take a position. The pay, I know, will be small, but it will make me self-supporting. Calvin has agreed to buy my share of the farm for fifteen hundred dollars, and with that we can furnish a heavenly little place.

She went further into her plan, which she had kept to herself for six months. June was the month she had always wanted for their wedding; if he was pleased and could get away from the office, she had selected the twenty-eighth. It had been the twenty-eighth of June, eleven years before, that he had caught her in his arms for the first time, out there under the great pine tree which had been their trysting place.

She wished the ceremony there under the old pine —her dreams fulfilled at the hallowed spot where they had begun. Besides, she added, the parlor was so tiny that most of the guests would have to stay outdoors, anyhow. Her wedding dress was finished; no fingers but hers had touched it; no eyes but hers had seen it.

Deepening shadows darkened the car window. Channing Searles could no longer read. He sat with bowed head, and his lips moved in one of the strangest prayers a man ever uttered; he was ask-

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ing God to damn him eternally for what he had done.

At midnight Searles had to change trains. The time-tables had been juggled about since he had last made this same trip, and he discovered that it would have been just as well had he waited in New York until some five hours later. He did not get out of the junction until seven o'clock in the morning.

It was past noon when the antiquated locomotive labored wearily, like a fat old man out of breath from a hard climb, up the heavy grade, which even the sharp S turn could not avoid, and came to a wheezing halt at the shabby station that marked Searles' destination.

Although it was late June, the air was crisp with a cool wind blowing down from the mountains. The breath of the pine forests tingled the lungs with their stimulating fragrance. Off in the distance Mount Washington, highest of the Presidential Range, swam in a gauzy purple mist.

Searles looked for the tall, raw-boned form of Calvin Oakes among the little group on the station platform. He was not here. All the faces were unfamiliar. Two arriving guests for The Inn at Chochorua, with their fishing rods, were loading their luggage into an automobile. Three girls in knickers were looking about, with light hiking knapsacks strapped to their shoulders. Even the station agent was a stranger.

The meager village straggled thinly up the sharp slope of the hill; as a boy, Searles had wondered why its buildings did not slide to the bottom from

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force of gravity. Perched upon the crest was Squire Hodge's store, the only commercial establishment. Searles, thinking there might be a message for him at the store, and, if not, that he might be able to arrange some way of getting out, struck out up the inclining street.

Hodge's store filled all the local wants. There were groceries, dry goods, hardware, stationery, paints, a modest assortment of wall paper, souvenirs, picture post cards, and sporting goods; it was also the meat market and post office. Squire Hodge was behind the frail wooden partition, sorting the mail.

While Searles waited for the government's business to be disposed of, a rig drove up in front of the roofed porch. Heavy boots clumped noisily on the rattling boards, and a face, bristling with a black beard stubble, appeared in the doorway.

"I've come fer you, 'Oz.'"

It had been so long a time since Searles had heard himself called Oz that he was startled. He had launched life with the christened name of Oswald, which all but his mother had promptly abbreviated to Oz. He had always loathed the name and considered it a handicap. Upon entering school he had promptly appropriated his grandmother's family name of Channing which, he told himself, at least had dignity.

"Allow y' don't remember me. I've growed some since the time I caught y' in Hart's grove, makin' a speech to a jury of birch trees. Gosh, Oz, y' was as flabbergasted as if I'd of come on y' kissin'

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another fella's wife. Gimme a nickel not to tell nobody."

Searles smiled faintly. This was Ezra Waite, Dora's cousin. Some time previously, Dora had written that Ezra had been arrested by the prohibition officials for selling liquor, and that Jed Waite, Ezra's father, had been hard put to raise the amount of the fine.

"Allow we might as well get started, Oz. It's a right smart drive—every rod of fifteen mile, though there's some says it ain't but twelve. Uphill an' down it comes nearer to bein' twenty."

As they got into the rig, and Ezra Waite slapped the reins over the backs of the team, Searles caught the smell of alcohol. Evidently Ezra had not learned his lesson.

"Tell me, Ezra—how is she? Is—is she still alive?"

"Uh-huh."

"Thank God for that! Does—does she suffer much pain?"

"Allow she's been out of her head most of the time. Gran'ma Waite says Doc Belden has been jabbin' some kind o' stuff in her arm a' keep her from carryin' on when the pain gets real bad."

"I had a letter from Calvin, but it only reached me yesterday afternoon. He said it was an accident, but he neglected the details. How did it happen?"

"Can't say *how* it happened, Oz, but I cac'late she was ridin' a lot careless. Most likely she was thinkin' 'bout you 'stead of the horse. Anyhow,

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she was throwed off. Bein' night she wasn't found till mornin', lyin' 'longside the road 'bout ten yards t'other side Tatum's Corners. Sort of in the ditch she was, with her back across a rock. Her hittin' the rock was what made it so bad. She must have been there eight hours or more; them that picked 'er up thought she was dead fer sure."

A puzzled frown creased sharply between Searles' eyes. If what Ezra said was true, Dora had been riding alone at midnight, or near midnight, and Tatum's Corners was a good ten miles from the Oakes' farm. He couldn't understand it.

"What was she doing on a horse at such an hour?" he demanded. "Where was she going?"

"She was goin' home," Ezra told him. "She ought to *stayed* home 'stead o' ridin' twenty-five miles, two an' three times a week, goin' to that dang fool school." He snorted disgustedly. "I never seen such a girl! Learnin' to be 'a business woman,' Cal said. What was the sense o' that now? You'd think she was aimin' to support *you* when you an' her got hooked up. It does beat all, the notions females get into their heads!"

Searles flinched, and a groan slipped past his clenched teeth. His face was white. Dora taking that long ride into town, night after night, so that she would not be a burden to him, and it was costing her life!

"Feelin' sick, Oz?" asked Ezra.

"Yes, I am sick—sick inside," Searles answered thickly.

"I got a few swigs of purty fair stuff under

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the seat. Friend o' mine sneaked it past the customs men at Canaan. You take the lines a minute an' I'll——"

"Not for me, Ezra. Thanks just the same. My sickness is mental; I couldn't make you understand." What he meant was that he didn't want Ezra to understand.

"Allow I understand, all right, Oz. You're all cut up over her bein' took away from you. It'll make Cal feel some kinder toward you to see you takin' it so hard. Gran'ma Waite says Cal got it into his head you'd took up with some of them Noo York flappers when you quit writin' all of a sudden."

"Yes?" Searles said mechanically.

Previous "swigs" from the bottle beneath the buggy seat had inspired Ezra to unusual loquacity.

"Cal didn't take much stock in you bein' too sick fer writin'," he went on. "Cal allowed, so Gran'ma Waite says, it was kinder suspicious the letters quit comin' right at the time Dora was gettin' things ready fer the weddin'. Claimed it looked like you was aimin' to back out o' it when it come to a show-down.

"Guess there ain't nothin' Cal would have stopped at if it had o' turned out that way. Cac'late he'd have follered you down, an'—well, there ain't no tellin' what he'd have done to you. Put a bullet through you more'n likely. Cal's terruble bitter medicine when he gets riled. I never seen a fella that got mad so quick an' stayed mad so long. Gran'ma Waite says it ain't no less'n the

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hand o' God that's kept Cal from bein' hung fer murder.

"Remember that time, Oz, when we was all puttin' up the hay, an' Cal went after 'Hemp' Tyler with a pitchfork?"

Searles did remember. Ezra's words revived a long forgotten, but now vivid, picture. Never, before or since, had he seen a rage so savagely terrible, so primitively unreasoning. The provocation had been so trivial that he had forgotten exactly what it was. Hemp Tyler had made some sort of crude jest that Calvin resented as reflecting upon his father. Calvin had always been passionately loyal to his own; particularly would he resent any humiliation of his sister, for Dora was the idol of his family devotion. Searles realized that what Ezra said was not mere empty talk. It would be wise for him to be careful where Calvin was concerned.

Ezra babbled on, frequently quoting Gran'ma Waite on varied topics. She was the family oracle; she had an opinion upon every subject, no matter how remote from her limited experience, and a concoction of herbs for almost every possible ailment. Only with Dora's injury did she confess herself baffled.

His supply of mountain gossip finally run dry, Ezra Waite turned questioner. He wanted to know about New York, particularly of its wickedness, and was keenly disappointed that Searles gave him no shocking picture of Broadway which he had imagined must be a street given entirely to beautiful

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women and gilded, glittering sin. He took no stock whatever in Searles' weary explanation that Broadway was for the most part a thundering cañon of commercialism, crowded with people seriously concerned about making a living; in fact, Searles' muteness on the depravity of "The Devil's High-way"—Ezra had got that out of a lurid Sunday supplement—convinced him that Oz was a very sly dog playing innocent.

After a time the conversation became so dull and fragmentary that Ezra began to drowse. The reins slipped from his hands and would have slid over the dashboard beneath the heels of the team had Searles not made a grab for them. He gave whip to the jaded horses, and, Ezra's body joggling against him, the journey continued. He was glad of the silence.

The passage of time lays but a light hand upon any mountain country, and it was so here. It seemed to Searles that nothing had changed since he could remember. It was as if this rugged wilderness of pine and birch trees was too beautiful for destruction by the puny hand of man. Houses were unpretentious and far between. Here and there a modest clearing. Born of thrifty stock, these folk are generally frugal, even in their aspirations.

Now they were almost there. Searles would have known, even with his eyes shut, because he recognized the odor of the balsams. There was the abandoned sawmill, which was on what had once been the Searles' homestead, and the sale of which

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had financed his first years at college. Sight of the house itself brought no flood of sweet memories; it gave him no feeling of resentment to see the birthplace of himself, his father, and his grandfather in alien hands. He had hated the drudgery that promised no future rewards, no prospective comforts; hated the summers for their profitless toil, hated the winters for their imprisonment and their loneliness.

Dora had given him the key with which to unlock those fetters; she had emancipated him, and he had killed her. Yes, Searles told himself, it amounted to that; he was morally guilty of murder! He saw her riding home that night, her thoughts so intent upon him, her mind so filled with dread that she had not been quick enough to check the bolt of the horse, as the animal shied at a ghostly something in the road. Horses, he knew, were easily startled in the darkness, and he had the whole thing pictured as clearly as if he had been an actual witness.

Then, too, continuing the building of the case against himself, had he been really fair with Dora he would have found a way, some way, to hasten the wedding. He could have managed somehow, small as his salary had been. Compared with the way people lived out here, Mrs. Chubb's boarding house had been luxury. Dora would have gladly shared an attic with him, and he, utterly selfish, had deserted her at the first opportunity to better himself. Only he had not bettered himself; he realized that now. The price had been too high.

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An audible groan burst from him, and Ezra Waite, at this sound, stirred from his tipsy doze.

"Guess I was sort o' nappin'," he mumbled. "Mighty near home, ain't we? Wonder if Cal beat me back?"

"Cal?" said Searles. "Did he go somewhere? I thought the reason he didn't meet me at the train was that he wanted to be home with Dora, if she took a turn for the worse."

"Kind o' seemed queer to me; first time he's left the house since she was hurt," Ezra answered. "He stopped by our place bright an' early this mornin', sayin' I was to hook up an' fetch you out. Told me he was goin' over to the county seat. Didn't say what he was goin' there fer, but Gran'ma Waite kind o' allowed that he was goin' to get a marriage license."

"Marriage license?" blurted Searles, feeling as if he had suddenly been submerged in an icy lake.

"Fer Dora and you," Ezra stated. "Gran'ma Waite couldn't think o' no other reason fer Cal goin' to the county seat. This was the day Dora had picked fer the weddin'."

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CHAPTER IV

THE NATIVE RETURNS

THE horses topped the crest of the last intervening hill. Below, in the narrow, shallow valley, was the Oakes homestead. There was the house, ancient, shabby and ugly, standing bleakly in a cleared space, some fifty yards back from the road. One might wonder why it had been so ruthlessly shorn of trees when foliage would have clothed its stark, aged nakedness with shadows, green and kind. There was a reason, a practical one.

With the influx of summering folk and automobile parties gypsying by the roadsides, the hazard of forest fires had become a constant dread menace. A carelessly flung match, the smoldering embers of an abandoned camp fire easily becomes a raging storm of flame, a fiery tidal wave of destruction consuming everything that lies in its path. Those who are wise protect their buildings with a clearing for a fire break.

The barn, an old custom in rural New England, was attached to the dwelling, with only a passageway between. This arrangement was extremely convenient during winter when, otherwise, tunnels would have to be cut through the snow to get at the live stock, but it was not so commendable in summer, when there were stable odors and flies.

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"Yep, Cal's got back," said Ezra Waite. "There's his buggy standin' in the lane. An' that's him, I allow, waitin' down there by the gate."

Ezra had not noticed Searles' sudden panic, and it was perhaps fortunate for Searles that he had been forewarned. If Calvin Oakes had seen the look of horror widening the other's eyes, the spasm of terror twitching his features, he would have known things were not right. Advised in advance what the plans were, Searles had time to get a grip on himself, an opportunity to meet this overwhelming situation. He remembered the time Calvin had gone after Hemp Tyler with the pitchfork, and a cold chill of fear swept through him. Calvin would kill him; of that he was absolutely certain.

The rig coasted swiftly down the sharp incline, the team breaking into a clumsy gallop, as the traces banged their buttocks. Calvin Oakes had opened the sagging gate which led into the lane. He stood motionless, awaiting their approach.

A gaunt giant, with huge, lumpy hands and hairy wrists hanging below his coat sleeves, clad in a wrinkled suit of blue serge, which for ten years or more had been his "Sunday clothes," Calvin's face bore the stamp of his grim life. Because of their immobility, one might have considered his features expressionless, but their very inflexibility told things. The wide, tightly closed mouth indexed him as a man sparing in his speech. Not often did those compressed lips relax into a smile; no one had ever heard them give voice to com-

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plaint. He met life, as life had met him, sternly, without humor. Whatever expression there may have been in his eyes was masked in a shadow cast by his overhanging brows. Only when one of his terrible angers stirred him, the pupils became dilated and burned, black and hot, with the fire of his rage.

Ezra Waite swung the horses around the abrupt turn and pulled them to a halt. Calvin Oakes, his eyes upon Searles, still did not move. His arms rested upon the top plank of the gate, arms knobbed with two great hands now closed into a pair of massive fists.

Searles climbed down stiffly. He was glad his clothes were wrinkled, and that his collar was soiled; these things kept him from looking too prosperous. He knew that Calvin, behind those screening eyebrows, was staring at him with critical questioning and hostile accusation.

"Dora—she is—I'm not too late?" Searles said with difficulty; he fought to keep his eyes steady, but they wavered. He checked the movement to offer his hand in greeting. Calvin's fingers remained closed in unfriendly-looking fists.

"Took you a long time to get here," said Calvin Oakes. His tone demanded an explanation.

"I came as soon as I knew. I was on the train within an hour after I received your telegram." Searles realized it sounded defensive and, perhaps, evasive.

"Likely true 'bout the telegram," Calvin responded

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stonily, "but what about the letter I wrote? Got my letter, didn't you?"

"Yes, I got it, Calvin, but not until yesterday afternoon."

"Mailed it Sunday. Had Ezra there take it to the railroad station an' put it on the train fer New York. It certainly should have got to you Monday mornin'."

"No doubt it reached my address on time, but I wasn't there. Even the letters Dora wrote before she was hurt did not come into my hands until yesterday afternoon." Searles was uneasy under this cross-examination, and his words came haltingly.

"Why did you quit writin'?" Calvin's voice was hard and brittle.

"I—I've been sick," Searles answered lamely.

"You're lyin', Oz. Always was a poor liar." Calvin's gaze passed from the other's face and rested upon the purpled peaks of the mountains in the distance. "You look kind o' scared, Oz. Guess you needn't be—providin' you've come with your mind made up to do the right thing by Dora. She made me promise to keep my hands off you. Only——" The unfinished sentence, accompanied by a tightening of his hands until the bony knuckles bulged, was significant.

"Ain't no reason, is there, why you an' her shouldn't be married 'fore she passes on?"

"Calvin," Searles burst out, desperately avoiding a direct answer, "I love Dora better than anything—better than——"

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"Exceptin' your own self, Oz. I been doin' a lot o' thinkin' 'bout you lately. It took me a long time to get you sized up right. You—you're no good. If you'd been any good, you wouldn't o' kept her waitin' so long."

Searles winced, as if the other had struck him, and then he inclined his head.

"Yes, Calvin," he said thickly, "you're right. I'm no good. I've been a fraud—a fraud to her and a fraud to myself. But, God is my witness, Calvin, I love her. It's only when I've lost her that I begin to know how much I really love her. I would die in her place, if I could."

This humility had the effect of moderating Calvin Oakes' hostility, and, while his face did not change its expression, his hands slowly unclenched. There was a moment of silence; even the faint whispering of the pines seemed hushed, knowing that death was passing this way. His body sagging dejectedly against the gate, Searles surrendered to a grief which no one could doubt was sincere.

"This was the day she'd picked fer the weddin'—the weddin' she's been waitin' fer so long," Calvin said slowly. "I seen it was goin' to make her passin' easier if you an' her could be married 'fore she went, so, when your telegram come, I read in some words that wasn't there.

"I told her you wanted me to get the license an' have it ready when you got here. Judge Clark fixed it up for me. When I told her——" His hands clenched again, his eyes burning blackly hot. "Oz, if you wasn't willin' to give her this

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last bit o' happiness, I'd string you up to the barn rafters by your thumbs an' do fer you—an inch at a time. I'd aim to make you suffer, like she's been sufferin'." Extravagance often robs a threat of its force, but, as Calvin Oakes gave voice to these words, they did not seem a mere exaggeration of the emotions; there was a real menace in them, real and terrible.

"We better be gettin' to the house now, Oz. She's countin' the minutes."

Summer is a fleeting season in this section of New Hampshire. It comes late and is early gone. This year it had been unusually tardy, and, although it was the end of June, Dora's rose beds at the side of the house had not been warmed into bloom. But Searles did not notice. His thoughts blundered back and forth through a maze from which he could find no escape.

"She's in the parlor," said Calvin. "Makes it some easier on Gran'ma Waite, doin' the cookin' an' the nursin'; saves her all the goin' up an' down stairs."

As they reached the porch, the battered screen door, its rust-rotted wire replaced with a more economical mosquito netting, creaked open, and Grandma Waite, tall and raw-boned, vigorous despite her nearing eighty years, stared fixedly at Searles, with a pair of sharp eyes which had never needed the aid of spectacles. With approval she noted how deeply stirred he was with grief, and to her mind this dissipated all suspicion. She

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reached out her bony hand and touched his shoulder consolingly. Grandma Waite had always liked Oz.

"The sweet darlin' is frettin' fer ye, sonny," she said, her harsh, somewhat nasal voice achieving a miraculous softness. "Knowin' yer was comin' has kinder helped her t' fergit the pain. Her mind has been sort o' floatin' 'round in the clouds since the telegram got here. I allow she'll never be no happier'n she is right now—even when she gits t' heav'n."

The small parlor, in addition to the furniture which had belonged to the Oakes family for two and three generations, had a more modern equipment of convenience—only thirty years old—a folding bed which, when closed, presented to view an ornamental expanse of mirror. In this room the occasional guests were both entertained and put up for the night.

Searles stood in the doorway, his hat crushed into a shapeless mass between his hands, staring across the foot of the bed. Her hand fluttered toward him, and, in the shadows, her eyes had the light of stars shining through a graying twilight.

Dora's beauty, when one looked from her face to the harsh, granite-hewn features of her brother, might be considered something to marvel about; but her mother, before endless toil and embittered resignation had crushed out her youth and her prettiness, had been the belle of the mountains. Searles, coming closer, thought he had never seen Dora more beautiful than now. Silently he dropped to his knees beside the bed. Her fingers crept

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across the sheet until they caressingly touched his cheek.

"Kiss me," she whispered.

Searles kissed her. Even when life hung by so slender a thread, her lips were warm and clinging.

"Now I know," she murmured faintly. "Your kiss tells me you still love me. Nothing else matters. You are mine—mine." There were no questions, no reproaches. "Sit beside me—in the chair. Hold my hand—tightly. Don't let me go away from you—too soon."

Grandma Waite, her eyes swimming, slipped the chair nearer the bed. Searles slumped down, tortured with emotions. Dora's fingers clung to his, as if that fragile clasp would keep her from slipping into the beyond. After a time, with a smile which was but the ghost of a smile, her eyes closed, and she lay still as death. For one awed instant Searles thought it was death; it seemed to him her breathing had ceased. His body twitched with a spasm of horrified terror.

He had been left an orphan before he could remember; until now death had been a vague, impersonal something that happened to every one, sooner or later. Now it became real, vivid; in his fancy he heard the rustle of unseen wings—a soul in flight.

Grandma saw his stricken face and knew what was in his mind. Her hand touched his shoulder.

"She's jest fell asleep, Oz, an' it's the first

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natural sleep she's had since it happened. Yer comin' has done more'n the doctor could do."

Calvin Oakes was standing by the window, staring toward the road. His eyes were intent upon a faint puff of dust he had seen rise above the top of the hill. A moment later a figure on horseback crept over the rise.

"Looks like that's the parson comin'," said Calvin.

"Sh!" warned Grandma Waite. "If it's the parson, keep him outside till Dora wakes up. She ain't to be disturbed when she's sleepin' so natural an' peaceful."

But when Searles gently withdrew his hand from Dora's, she stirred and opened her eyes again. The movement, slight as it was, caused her to compress her lips against a moan of pain.

"Don't leave me, Oz—don't leave me for a moment."

"The parson is comin', darlin'," said Grandma Waite. "I better git things ready like yer wanted 'em."

"Our—wedding day, Oz. No matter what happens, dear, you shall belong to me, forever and ever."

Calvin looked out of the window again. The slowly plodding horse had come near enough for him to recognize the Reverend John Westerfelt, the minister's spare frame jouncing wearily in the saddle, his hoary beard ribboning across his shoulder.

While Searles remained in the chair, brain and body numb with a kind of helpless paralysis, Grandma Waite went to a chest of drawers and

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took from the topmost one a mass of frilly white material, carrying it sacredly to the bed.

"Course yer can't really put it on, darlin', but if I kind o' lay it across, sort o' drape the sleeves 'long yer arms. She made ever' stitch o' it with her own hands, Oz. Ain't it pretty?"

This was Dora's wedding dress. So skillful were Grandma Waite's clumsy-looking fingers that when she had finished her tender task it was hard to believe the fluffy mass did not actually envelop the injured girl's slender body. Then Dora's head was lifted gently from the pillow, and the bride's veil slipped about her hair.

All this Searles watched dully. He had surrendered himself to the situation. He no longer considered the menace of Calvin's avenging anger; his only thought now was that it would be unspeakably brutal to destroy the happiness of Dora's last hours.

And, after all, what harm was done? Calvin had undoubtedly procured the marriage license under the name of Oswald Searles. New York was as remote from this spot as if the two places were on different continents, and in New York he was not Oz Searles but Channing Searles. Who would know?

"Give Oz the ring, grandma," Dora's faint voice said. "It was mother's ring, Oz. You won't be hurt——" Searles shook his head dumbly and tried to smile.

The minister's horse had turned into the lane.

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The old man dismounted stiffly, and Calvin went out on the porch to meet him.

The Reverend John Westerfelt was a fixture in the community. It had been almost ten years since he had laid claim to a regular pastorate, and no one knew exactly how he managed to live. His frock coat was threadbare and rusty; his shoes were sad affairs, indeed.

He had been apprised of the situation, but the sight of Dora Oakes filled his faded old eyes with sympathetic tears. She had talked often with him of Oz Searles, of Oz's ambitions and of her faith in his future. The patriarch lifted his head, white as the snows of the many winters through which he had lived, and his bearded lips moved in a brief prayer.

Calvin brought an envelope from his pocket; the paper, as he unfolded the marriage license, crackled loudly in the stillness of the room. The minister, his worn Bible appearing from the breast of his coat, advanced to the foot of the bed. On the fly-leaf of the Holy Book was written the marriage service, but there was no need for him to read from it. Hundreds of times those set phrases had flowed solemnly from his tongue, and he knew them by rote. But they did not flow now. The words stumbled thickly from his lips, mostly inaudible.

Searles heard it as a far-off, phantom voice. Grandma Waite prompted him when the time came to slip the heavy band of gold about Dora's slender finger. He felt her hand tremble.

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"What God hath joined together, let no man put asunder."

It was over. Unsteadily Searles got up from his knees. He leaned over the bed and kissed Dora's full, curved lips. Her face was radiant with happiness and, although it cost her pain, she found the strength to slip her arm about him. She held him close, very close.

"My husband!" she whispered. "Mine—after so long a time. Oh, dear God, don't take me away from him. Let me live—let me live!"

There was a rift in the gray clouds which moved sluggishly over the tops of the mountains. A shaft of sunlight shot through and found the parlor window, a stream of golden radiance which fell across Dora's face and glinted with yellow fire upon the ring circling her finger.

"It's a sign!" cried Grandma Waite, her voice husky, trembling with awe as she watched the golden ray. "God's answerin' yer, child. Glory be to God!"

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CHAPTER V

A NEW PREDICAMENT

WHAT if Dora did live? While Searles had long since outgrown certain mystic superstitions which translate the frequent tricks of nature into all sorts of portents, both good and evil, there *had* been something startling about the stream of sunlight pouring, warm and golden, from out of the cold, gray sky, through the window of the cramped little parlor and across Dora's face, as she prayed for life, and which Grandma Waite had promptly interpreted as a sign direct from Heaven.

All of Searle's thoughts became fixed on the possibility that Dora would live. It was not, however, until some time afterward, his mind in a heavy fog, that he reduced this strange marriage to a concrete legal term. Bigamy! He had made himself guilty of a crime. He was a bigamist!

How could he ever hope to escape from such a tangle, if Dora lived? If, of course, death claimed her, to-day would in all probability become a closed chapter. They would carry her to the top of the third hill up the road, and there, while the tears of the Oakes clan mingled with those of the Waites, they would put her to rest in the family plot, where there was always the soft whimper of the

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