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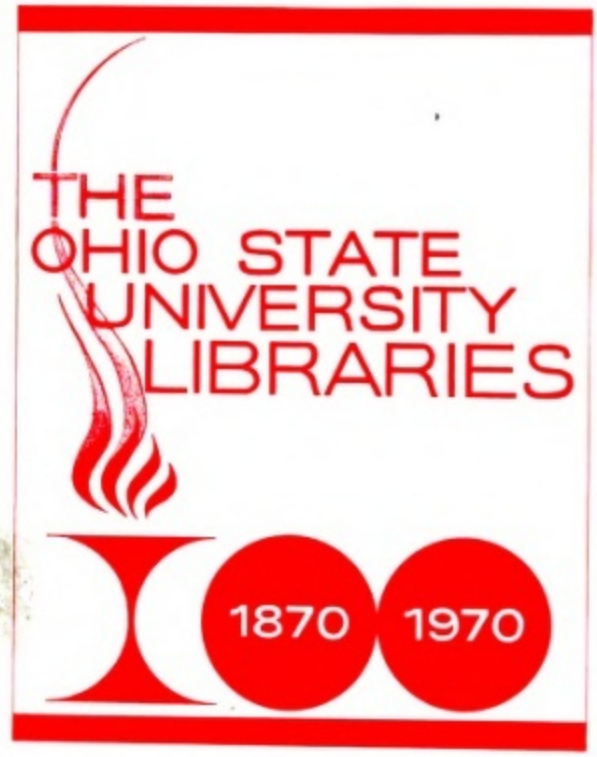

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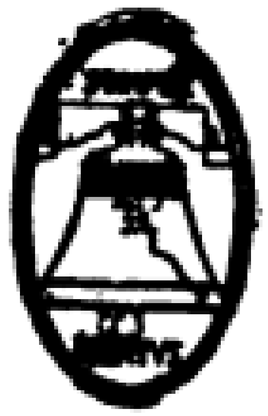
THE MAN WHO CONVICTED HIMSELF

BY

DAVID FOX



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The Man Who Convicted Himself

CHAPTER I

THE REUNION

IN the lobby of one of the city's most cosmopolitan hotels, on an early evening in midsummer, was seated an individual worthy of a second glance even in the heterogeneous throng which at that season gathers from all points of the compass to make of the metropolis a vast playground.

He was a man in perhaps the late fifties, with a thin, lugubrious face and dark hair graying slightly at the temples, and the unrelieved black of his immaculate although somewhat old-fashioned garments enhanced his ministerial appearance.

He might have been a country clergyman on his first visit to the city, save that his assured, dignified poise and the lack of interest with which he regarded each passer-by betokened a larger experience.

From behind a pillar near the telephone exchange a stout, almost burly, figure in a gray business suit had been watching him for some time and finally caught his eye. The benevolent stranger returned his gaze without the flicker of an eyelash, and with a grin and a shrug the burly one turned away just as a man of quite another type entered from the street door, paused, and then moved quietly and

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unobtrusively around behind the leather lounge upon which the older visitor was seated.

The newcomer was a man of forty-five or thereabout, tall and well-built with keen gray eyes, and he bore himself with the easy, well-bred manner of an aristocrat; yet as he bent slightly toward the thin, black-clothed shoulders, strange words issued from his apparently immobile lips:

"Will your control appear to-night, Professor?"

The elderly figure turned with an almost imperceptible start. His bland eyes had narrowed, and over his ascetic countenance a crafty, cautious expression had fallen as a veil, but when he recognized the questioner it lifted swiftly.

"Rex, you old-timer!"

"Not so loud!" the other warned, turning away. "Egyptian Room in ten minutes."

He strolled off in the direction of the restaurant indicated, leisurely relinquished his Panama and stick to the coatroom boy, nodded with casual boredom in response to the effusive greeting of the headwaiter, and selected a table obviously intended for four in a secluded corner. As he lighted a cigarette and leaned back to observe the brilliant scene before him, he looked every inch the cultivated, affluent, experienced man of the world, and yet there seemed to be something tense and eager beneath his composure and there was a curious gleam in the lightning-like glance he darted at the door.

The ten minutes lengthened into twenty before his acquaintance of the lobby appeared in the doorway and, after gravely surveying the gay groups before him, moved with no sign of recognition toward the corner where the other man sat all but concealed by the branching palms.

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He was passing the table when the man he had called "Rex" uttered a low exclamation of cordial surprise and rose with extended hand. To a possible onlooker, the meeting would have seemed the most casual in the world, but when they had ordered coffee and sat facing each other across the table the "Professor" announced grimly:

"Couldn't come before. The house dick is watching me like a lynx."

"Has he got anything on you?" his host demanded sternly. "Are you wanted anywhere, George? I've got to know before we can talk business, and you know better than to —er—dissemble with me."

"I should think not!" The ascetic individual's face took on an expression of injured dignity. "After being the guest of the government in every state of the Union, do you think I would have been sitting calmly there in the lobby if there were anything out against me? I have been leading an utterly blameless life and it palls, my friend, it palls!—Have you anything good on?"

The swift change from ministerial dignity to avid interest in the last question was ludicrous in the extreme, but his companion did not smile.

"The biggest thing of our lives," he responded, his utter lack of emphasis making the statement all the more weighty. "We shall need some others, though, whom we can absolutely trust; those in other branches of our late profession. Do you know where any of our former associates are? I had intended to make discreet inquiries when my plan was more fully matured."

"Would Lucian Baynes be of any use to us?" George

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suggested. "You remember him, don't you? Best smuggler in his day—"

"And one of the greatest jewel experts and art connoisseurs alive!" supplemented Rex, the eagerness showing for an instant beneath his iron control. "He will be one of the best people we could get. Where is he?"

"Right here in this hotel." George rose, as the waiter approached with the coffee. "Saw him in the barber shop not an hour ago and he told me to look him up—slipped me his new monniker and room number. I'll bring him."

In an incredibly short space of time he returned with a man a few years younger than his host in tow.

"Mr. Powell, let me present Mr. Lester Ballyntine." George performed the introduction like a benediction. "I have taken the liberty of mentioning your little proposition to Mr. Ballyntine, and he is much interested. I find that he, like myself, is at perfect liberty to take it up."

The two shook hands cordially and Lucian Baynes, alias Mr. Ballyntine, the despair of the customs authorities of more countries than his own, made a third at the council table.

He was fastidious but not effeminate in appearance, with light, slightly thin brown hair, blue eyes and a small blond mustache which he stroked to mask the low, drawling words which issued from his lips.

"When George Roper told me that it was actually you, Rex Powell, who awaited us here I was delighted, my dear chap! I wanted to congratulate you on the disagreement of the jury in that Los Angeles affair; it was a master stroke!"

"Thanks, old man," Powell replied somewhat dryly. "I

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hadn't heard that you had returned from the—er—health resort to which your physician recommended you, or I should have made an effort to look you up before this."

Baynes' mustache lifted in a smile that was not all mirth.

"I have been in the best of health for the past two years," he remarked. "But suppose we talk business? What is this little proposition which our reverend friend mentioned to me?"

Powell shook his head.

"I won't go into it until we are all together," he announced. "Can you suggest any more of the old fraternity who might join us?"

"Well, without being conversant with the nature of the proposition, I don't know what type of chap would fit in, but I saw Bunthorne the other day—"

"No. There will be no strong-arm work necessary. This is purely a gentleman's game," Powell explained. "That was why I sent George for you the moment I learned that you were here. I fear that George himself has reverted slightly to the speech of his earlier profession, but a little practice will obviate that. We will move only in the best society, and we shall require at least three more experts in different lines who can upon occasion shine in the highest circles."

"Rather a tall order, Rex." Baynes shrugged. "Experts in what, for instance?"

"Well, a person who might in courtesy be called a handwriting expert, for one. A gentleman whose study and knowledge of various types of chirography has been profound."

"What is the matter with Clifford Nichols?" Baynes

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asked. "Harvard graduate, Latin Quarter student and all that. If he had confined his etching to pictures instead of banknotes and his signatures to those of his father and uncle rather than strangers', he would now be cooling his heels at Newport, instead of cooped up in a Bronx flat. Shall I go and telephone to him?"

"Clifford Nichols by all means!" Powell assented. "It is odd, but I had not thought of him. Tell him to hurry, old man, for we don't want to hold too long a session here."

"I am grieved that I am not up to the gentlemanly standard required for your new proposition!" George remarked with an air of reproach when they were alone. "To which of my previous professions were you alluding just now, Rex?"

Rex Powell smiled for the first time and the sunny geniality which swept over his face softened the tense lines with an irresistible charm, as for an instant he laid his hand over the thin, sallow one of his friend.

"To the days when you could sell an oblong of gilt to a guileless stranger, or a block of stock consisting only of pretty certificates to a wily investor with equal facility," he replied. "George, you old rascal, did you think I was referring to those early wires from the races, or your Indian girl control who used to frighten elderly maiden ladies with messages from another world until they parted with their hoarded inheritances?"

A sanctimonious but unmistakable grin manifested itself upon the solemn countenance of his companion.

"To revert, brother, to the vernacular you deplore, them was the happy days!" he sighed, with his fingertips together

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and his eyes uplifted. "I doubt that we shall know them again!"

"Cliff Nichols will be here as soon as the subway can bring him," Baynes announced as he returned to the table. "Now, who else, Rex? You spoke of two more."

"A retired physician would be an admirable addition to our circle." Powell spoke musingly, as though thinking aloud. "One who is not only learned in medicine but is a bit of a specialist in toxicology."

George Roper's face paled slightly.

"Good Lord, Rex, we are not going as far as that in this thing, are we?" he asked. "I'm good for anything under the canopy but poison—"

"My dear fellow, don't jump to conclusions!" Powell said sharply in a lowered tone. "When you know the proposition you will understand how useful such a confrère will be to us. Can you recall any one who would be suitable?"

"Well," George reflected, "there's old Doc Raymond—"

"Chronic alcoholic," interrupted Baynes tersely. "You couldn't trust him now to chloroform a dog. Pointdexter might do—"

"He turned state's evidence in the Brice case, as you may remember." Powell pushed aside his cup and slipped another cigarette into his amber holder. "Infernally clever chap, but we want no cowards in this game."

"Lord, I wish we knew where to lay our hands on Corliss!" ejaculated George fervently. "Haven't seen him in ten years but he was a wizard at chemistry; learned it when he was an undertaker's assistant as a boy. He knows poi-

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sons that the Borgias forgot, and he can play the gentleman even if he wasn't born one."

"Henry Corliss?" Powell's face lighted eagerly. "Gad, I had forgotten all about him! If he's still alive a night letter to 053 Vernon Avenue, St. Louis, will bring him. I'll send it when we leave here.—How are you, Cliff? Glad to see you with us!"

He arose and shook the slender, tapering white hand of an esthetic-looking individual who had strolled toward their table. The latest arrival was well under forty and the soft collar and bow tie which he affected made him appear even younger, although there were tired lines about the pale, cold eyes behind broad-rimmed glasses, and the slightly long hair, spiked mustache and tiny, dark goatee lent him an air of studied eccentricity.

There were lingering signs, too, of a significant pallor upon his finely chiseled features, and he greeted the others with short, halting phrases as though speech came not easily to him.

"How long—?" Powell asked with a note of sympathy in his tone as Clifford Nichols took the last vacant chair.

"Three months," responded the other listlessly. "I can't seem to come back this time as I did before. Getting neurasthenic, I imagine. That is why I rather jumped at your message, old man. Glad to get out of a rut. I say, what is the big idea? I'll have a try at anything, but they'll never take me again. It would be life next time, you know, and I'm fed up on the State's hospitality."

"They'll never take you on this proposition of mine, my boy. There's just one more of the old fraternity with whom

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I want to get in touch and then I'll outline it to you. Do you know when Philip Howe will be out?"

"Susceptible Phil?" Nichols shrugged. "When I left he was in solitary for making eyes at the warden's daughter. Poor little chap! He'll be out next Wednesday, though; had a note from him yesterday via the underground."

"Wednesday," Powell repeated. "Henry Corliss will be here by then if my wire reaches him, and our circle, as George would say, will be complete. I shall have a lot to arrange in the meantime, but one of you must go up and meet Phil as he leaves the gates. I don't want him to fall into any other hands until I have put my proposition up to him."

"Not I!" Nichols shuddered. "I see it at night now, when I can get any sleep at all."

"I will go," George volunteered. "I'll hang on to that erring youth until we meet again. But when and where will that be, Rex? Not here, surely. Even though our consciences are all spotless for the moment I do not like the attentions of my friend the house detective. He is a coarse and skeptical creature and his opinion of his fellow men is shockingly degraded."

Rex Powell glanced at his watch.

"We will meet," he announced, "at exactly ten o'clock next Thursday morning in suite seventeen-twenty in the new Bolingbroke Building on Forty-second Street. Is it understood, gentlemen? Those who do not care to go into the proposition may withdraw, and I shall not even impose secrecy on them."

"Phew!" whistled George and as instantly unpuckered

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his lips into their usual thin line. "What kind of a game is this anyway, Rex? And the Bolingbroke, too; newest and biggest of the office buildings. Whom do we ask for when we come?"

"Find the number and walk in. I shall be there," Powell responded. "At ten o'clock Thursday, then; suite seventeen-twenty.—Waiter, my check."

Precisely to the moment on the day appointed Lucian Baynes and Clifford Nichols opened the door of suite number seventeen-twenty, and paused on the threshold. They found themselves in a tiny but luxurious anteroom with exquisitely carved old chairs, faded, mellow rugs of obvious antiquity and almost priceless value and a painting or two upon the walls at sight of which Baynes, the connoisseur, caught his breath in wordless appreciation. Over it all the glow of indirect lighting cast its soft effulgence, and although there were no windows a noiseless, unseen fan breathed a cool, refreshing wave of air upon them.

There was one incongruous note in the perfect room, however. It was furnished by a fluffy, golden-haired young person who sat behind an inlaid desk immediately opposite the entrance door, and whose jaws worked rhythmically and with such vigor that they forced her small red lips apart as she bent a steady blue-eyed gaze upon the visitors.

"I fear that we have made a mistake—" Baynes began, but even as he uttered the first syllable his quick eyes noted that one of the girl's slim fingers had touched a bit of the lighter grained inlaid wood upon the desk, and she smiled. "We were looking for a gentleman—"

"Mr. Powell?" The small jaws ceased their rhythmic

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motion for a moment. "He's expecting you. Go right in."

She rose and turning to the wall immediately beside her desk moved aside a panel, which slipped on noiseless rollers behind a picture. In the aperture, beside a Jacobean table black with age about which six huge leather chairs had been arranged, stood Rex Powell in an office almost Spartan in its simplicity, yet in which rugs and appointments bespoke the same quiet elegance as the anteroom.

One of the chairs was already occupied and by a stranger, an exceedingly fat, exceedingly bald man of perhaps fifty, whose smooth, broad face bore a benevolent smile and who rubbed his plump hands together in unctuous welcome as he awaited an introduction.

"Good morning, Lucian. You're looking better, Cliff, old man. Allow me to present Henry Corliss—Doctor Corliss, for our professional purposes. He is an old friend of mine and I believe will prove a valued associate." Powell motioned toward the stranger and when the formal acknowledgments had been made he gestured about the office. "What do you think of our new sanctum?"

Clifford Nichols sank into a chair, his tapering fingers drumming lightly on its arms. The panel by means of which they had entered had slid silently back into place, and he saw that the room was hexagonal in shape, and in the center of each side he descried a panel similar to the first.

"The effect is excellent, Rex," Baynes responded. "But why a genuine Van Dyck in the same room with a young person who masticates wintergreen gum? It is a false note, old chap."

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"I say, why is this room six-sided, and what is behind each of the other panels?" demanded Nichols.

Powell laughed pleasantly.

"You will see for yourself presently.—But wait!"

He had seated himself once more in his chair at the head of the long table and now his hand slipped beneath its edge. Instantly, as clearly as though it were breathed into their very ears, they heard the smooth, sympathetically paternal tones of George Roper.

"My dear young lady, can you tell me where we can find—?"

Powell's hand tensed beneath the table's edge and he rose again as the panel swung back, disclosing the familiar, tall, gaunt figure of George clad in ministerial black, and just behind him a small, dapper man of about thirty-five with a weak but undeniably handsome face and irrepressibly merry eyes in which a trace of cowed furtiveness still lingered.

"Come in, George. Here is your old friend, Henry Corliss.—Philip, my boy!" Powell grasped the hand of the last arrival, and shook it warmly. "Gentlemen, those of you who have never met Mr. Howe will have the pleasure of knowing the greatest safe-cracker of the age. There isn't a combination ever invented that he cannot work and as for the less subtle methods he is an expert in all of them, from nitro and violet rays to electricity."

The slim little dandy's pale face flushed with pardonable pride beneath the other's praise and, when they were all seated, his eyes glanced curiously about the room and back with eager expectancy to the man who had greeted him.

"Gentlemen," began Rex Powell, "I know you all want

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to know without loss of time why I have called you together for this meeting. The proposition I have to put to you is a startling one, but I ask that you let me have the floor until I have finished. I have already said that any one who wishes to drop out may do so. I have worked with all of you at one time or another in each of your special lines, and you know that I am a man of my word."

"You've never been sent up, Rex, either!" Philip Howe broke in irrepressibly.

"The luck of the game!" Powell shrugged. "However, I want to ask you one question, gentlemen. How many of you have averaged ten thousand a year every year since you started in your several lines of work? Come, Lucian, you've dealt in the riches of the earth, while we have been piking along. Have you averaged ten thousand a year, counting the years that you have been—er—retired from the practice of your profession?"

"I cannot say that I ever kept a budget." Baynes stroked his small blond mustache. "I have made one or two exceedingly rich hauls, and gotten away with many that were well worth while; but counting the periods you mention I doubt if I have averaged more than half the sum you have named."

"Ten thousand!" sighed George. "Are you—er—smoking anything stronger than Havana tobacco these days, dear friend?"

"Exactly," Powell resumed. "If I tell you that I have a proposition that will net each of us more than that in a year for as many years as we care to carry on; that the authorities will never hear of our activities, or if they do, that we shall be absolutely immune from them; when I tell

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you that we will be merely using our specialized knowledge in another way, safe, sure and highly profitable, will you take my word for it and go in with me?"

There was a pause and then Nichols asked:

"What is the proposition, Rex?"

Rex Powell bent forward suddenly in his chair.

"That we become honest men."

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CHAPTER II

FOR a moment they sat spellbound with sheer amazement, and then the dapper little safe-cracker exclaimed disgustedly:

"Hell!"

"Did you bring me all the way on from St. Louis to hand me the reformer's line of talk, Rex?" The "doctor's" fat face was comical in its dismayed reproach. "I thought you had something on that was worth while!"

"Ten thousand a year! Dear old chap, you're not serious!" Lucian Baynes expostulated. "As an art critic I fancy I shouldn't get very far with my record and I cannot imagine any other reputable pursuit that would be congenial."

"I feared there was a fly in the ointment." George Roper shook his gray head mournfully. Only Clifford Nichols was silent, his nearsighted eyes fixed on the inscrutable face of the man at the head of the table.

The latter turned swiftly to the author of the first ejaculation.

"Phil, if you saw a safe that had been rifled could you tell how it had been entered? Could you gauge the cleverness or bungling stupidity of the man who had opened it?"

Philip Howe smiled in an infinitely superior manner.

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"Better than any one else in America, I guess," he replied modestly.

"Very good." Powell pointed a finger at the lugubrious face of George Roper. "George, when you were in the fake spiritualistic game, your best play was to work on the emotions and credulity of your clients, wasn't it? Call it psychology, if you want to; it amounts to the same thing in your case. You questioned them adroitly, suggested, led them on to tell you things which you afterward 'revealed' to them; grew to be a mighty clever cross-examiner, didn't you?"

George nodded complacently.

"That is about the size of it," he remarked.

"Lucian, you're an adept at smuggling." Powell faced the man at his left. "But to make it profitable, to become the head of your profession, you had to learn the real from the spurious, didn't you? And in doing so you have become perhaps the greatest jewel expert and connoisseur of objects of art to-day."

"Oh, come, my dear chap!" Baynes deprecated.

"And you, Cliff," continued Powell. "I fancy you could tell the cleverest counterfeit, bills or coin, at a glance, couldn't you? As for handwriting, couldn't you beat the most celebrated expert who was ever called into court at his own game? You've studied every line and curve and slant and space—"

"I have," admitted Nichols with a slight flush. "But what are you driving at, Rex?"

"You, Henry." Powell turned to the last man. "You're a chemist, a toxicologist. If poison were administered to any one, you could diagnose the case or at least discover

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by analysis what the nature of the poison was as well as any coroner or medical examiner that ever lived."

"I ought to be able to!" Henry Corliss emitted a fat chuckle. "But what are you picking on us for, Rex?"

"Merely this. You are each a specialist in your own line, only we have all tackled the game from the wrong side; wrong not necessarily from the reformer's standpoint, but from the standpoint of practicability and profit. Look here! Suppose instead of a smuggler, Lucian became a tracer of stolen jewels and rare pictures; suppose instead of a forger and counterfeiter, Clifford used his extraordinary genius to detect forgery and counterfeiting; suppose George turned his subtle, psychological methods of wringing facts from people to good account by cross-examining informal and unconscious witnesses; suppose instead of safe-cracking, Philip—"

"Stop right there, Rex!" Philip Howe blazed out at him. "I see the game now! If you think that I'm going to turn on my old pals and sell them out—if you think I am going to become a phony detective, dig out evidence against the boys who have stuck to me and perjured themselves for me, and then hand them over to the police—!"

"I think nothing of the kind, Phil!" Powell turned sharply on him. "I told you our activities need never reach the knowledge of the police, and I mean it. Have you ever stopped to think of the number of cases which are never reported because the victims themselves for one reason or another have no desire to court investigation or publicity? In the case of theft they may not themselves have come honestly by the thing stolen, or they may suspect their own relatives and only desire to recover what is gone. Forgery,

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blackmail, fraud and chicanery of all sorts; there is no end to the big cases we might get and the enormous fees we might take in with a confidential investigating agency of a kind which has never been tried before in the world! Restitution, not prosecution, is my idea, and we won't double-cross our friends or turn any one over to the police unless he proves to be a rotter and a rank outsider even in the case of murder, should we decide that the person killed deserved his death. We'll hold court ourselves when we find the guilty one, and acquit or condemn him by majority vote. Will that satisfy your scruples?"

"Majority, with six of us?" George asked slowly.

"We'll arrange it so that no one of us knows what the others have voted and if the count is even I promise to step out," Powell responded. "Is that fair?"

"Fair enough," Nichols declared. There was a bright spot of color in his cheeks and his pale eyes glowed behind their glasses. "By Jove, old man, I think you have hit upon a master plan; but how are we going to get our clients? If there is to be no advertising, no publicity, we might sit here till the crack of doom waiting for some one to fall into that door out there."

"A private detective agency which advertises in the newspapers defeats its own ends unless it is only looking for shady divorce cases or the smaller fry," Powell explained. "I figure that if you fellows all come in we could handle every sort of case which might come our way. We've an organization here that covers every crime in the calendar, but we only want the cases of people who would ordinarily fly from the general run of private agencies and the police. Discretion is our biggest asset to gain the confidence of the

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right people; we've got to reach them in their homes."

"A fine chance we have of that, or of staying in business a week, either, when our own records come out." Philip was still unconvinced.

"How are they to do so, if we work not only independently of the police, but practically without their knowledge?" demanded Powell. "I propose to call our organization 'The Shadowers' and incorporate it as a bona fide concern, as indeed it will be. If any one does come to look us up, they will find only little Miss Jepson out there and she can tell a straight story. Moreover, that young person can smell a plainclothes man a block off, she says, and I am inclined to believe her."

"Heavens, do you mean to tell me that that little queen out there is one of us?" Philip gasped. "Noticed her when we came in. Holy cat! What eyes!"

"She is a find of mine," replied Powell. "I trailed her and watched her work for several days, and she is the niftiest little shoplifter this town ever saw! I had to pretend it was a pinch in order to get a chance to talk to her at all, but when I told her who I was and disclosed enough about our records to fill her with admiration she was glad and proud to throw her lot in with us. She is an expert office manager and stenographer—that was her line until Lefty Jane got hold of her and showed her how much easier it was to steal. If she knew we were going in for a legitimate thing she would desert us in disgust, but we are all heroes to her now, poor kid!"

"*Are* we going in for it?" Lucian Baynes looked from one to the other of them. "I admit that it looks like a good thing and it would certainly be a novel experience, but I

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see the same difficulty that Cliff has mentioned. How shall we get our cases?"

"You told us last week that this proposition meant moving in high society," George remarked. "Now you say that we have got to reach people in their homes. If you mean that you are going from house to house soliciting trade to help them unearth their family skeletons, you won't find a very warm welcome."

"I have had five hundred little notes engraved upon the best quality note paper, invitation size, and I propose to send them to five hundred matrons whose names I have culled from the Blue Book and from my own knowledge of the oldest and most exclusive families in town," responded Powell. "Here is a sample. How does it read to you?"

He handed a square of note-paper to Nichols, and as the other perused it a slight smile broke over his face.

"Capital!" Nichols exclaimed. "Listen to this: 'Dear Madam: Should you find yourself in need of any discreet, strictly confidential investigation by a private corporation of gentlemen, not blackmailers or inefficient bunglers, send your visiting card to "The Shadowers, Inc.," and an expert will call upon you at once. No divorce evidence or investigation of a scandalous or trivial nature will be undertaken. We have positively no connections with any so-called private detective agency, give no information to the press, permit no publicity, and never carry our results to the authorities unless expressly requested to do so by our clients. If you miss any documents, jewels or other valuables of great importance; if any one of your acquaintance is being subjected to blackmail; if your handwriting has been forged or you fear for the safety of some one near

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to you, communicate with us. Most respectfully yours, "The Shadowers, Inc."' "

"Suppose some old dame feels herself insulted by the insinuation, and takes your little missive to the police, Rex?" Henry Corliss suggested with a chuckle. "The investigation will begin at this end, and if they cannot hang anything on any of us, a column in the press will make 'The Shadowers' fade into the shadows mighty quick!"

"These will go only to the sort of lady who could afford no connection with the publicity which would follow. She would realize that all her friends would believe there was some special reason for the communication having been sent to her, and that alone would effectually close her lips." Powell smiled. "I am sending five hundred other letters, differing slightly in tone, to as many financiers here and in other cities. After that it must be a waiting game, of course, but I don't think it will be long."

"Well," Henry Corliss planted his fat hands on the table and gazed about at the serious, intent faces, "I'm with you, Rex. How is it with the rest?"

"I, too."

"And I." The responses came almost simultaneously from Baynes and Nichols.

"Well, I'll try anything once, and Rex has never steered me wrong yet," Philip announced. "But I'm going to state right here that if I hit upon the trail of any of my old friends I drop the whole thing right there. The boys have been good to me, and if they are smart enough to get away with anything from that bunch they are welcome to keep it as far as I'm concerned."

"As for me," supplemented George, "I'm with you all,

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as I said, but life is short and I am getting on in years. I hope something starts soon."

"Then it is settled, gentlemen." Powell rose. "'The Shadowers, Inc.,' is actively in business. Now let me show you your private offices and then we will go to lunch."

He opened the panel to the left of that by which they had entered and disclosed an office similar in size to the anteroom, and like it suffused with indirect lighting. Here the resemblance ended, however. The floor was of marble, a porcelain sink and wash basin stood in one corner, and the table, cabinets and shelves—which with a chair or two completed the furnishings of the room—were enameled and glass covered. Retorts, strange instruments of delicate mechanism and vials and jars of various chemicals stood about, and Powell took them all in with a comprehensive wave of his hand as he turned to the dumbfounded Henry Corliss.

"Your laboratory, Doctor. How do you like it?"

Without vouchsafing a reply Henry Corliss moved about the room dazedly fingering a retort here, a vial there, and when he paused again before Powell his fat, placid face had undergone a miraculous change. It was no longer that of a shrewd, good-natured rogue; his small eyes glowed with enthusiasm, and keen, eager lines lent character to the pendulous cheeks. The criminal was lost in the scientist and it was the latter who spoke.

"I've always dreamed of a laboratory like this! Rex, I shall do big things here, perhaps even perfect—" he broke off, and Powell patted him affectionately on a plump shoulder.

"I am sure you will, but don't let your researches inter-

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fere with business, you know. The next office is Cliff's."

He led the way back into the center room and through the third sliding panel. There they beheld walls lined with handsomely bound books of reference and a table covered with magnifying glasses, weighing machines and bottles of various acids, dyes and inks.

It was with difficulty that Clifford could be torn away to accompany them to the next office, which, unlike the others, was brilliant with the sunshine from two deep windows through which could be seen a wide vista over neighboring rooftops to the broad, distant river.

"No need to tell me where I get off!" Philip Howe cried excitedly, pointing to the tools and instruments scattered about, and the batteries and jars on the long shelves. "With these to help me, I could get into the Bank of England! Say, Rex—?"

"No turning any tricks on the side, my boy. That must be understood between us all. We're honest men now, remember, and as soon as one of us wants to quit the game he has only to say so, but while he remains a member of this organization he runs straight!"

"I was only kidding," Phil protested. "My job now is to run the other fellow down if he is an outsider, and if I don't succeed, Rex, it won't be your fault after handing me this splendid layout. Who is my neighbor on my right?"

"Lucian. It is just an office, you see, very much like Cliff's, but I think he will find any little help he may need in his work here."

The room with its books of reference, bottles of acids and magnifying glasses was in truth not unlike the one on the other side of Phil's, but in place of the weighing ma-

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chines stood an easel to hold paintings of doubtful origin while they were being tested, and teakwood cases for the repository of ceramics.

But Lucian Baynes scarcely saw them; a certain shelf of books had caught his eye and he was oblivious to all else.

"Bracaloni on intaglios!" he murmured in an almost awe-struck voice. "Where under the heavens did you find that monograph, Rex? I ransacked Italy for it! And surely—surely that is a first edition of the third volume of Hokusai's 'Mangwa'! I had understood that there were only three known to be left in the world!"

"It is reputed to be the real thing, but only you can tell that, old man," Powell replied. "Come now and see George's study, and then we'll go to lunch while Miss Jepson gets out those circulars."

But Lucian felt not the slightest interest in George's apartment nor in the prospect of food, and they were obliged to leave him there poring with rapt absorption over a huge and musty tome on emeralds.

"Can you beat it?" whispered Phil, as they entered the last of the offices which radiated from the main one. "If he is out of stir in his old age he'll be curator in some museum! What in the world—? Going to hold séances here, George, old boy?"

The last room, windowless like that from which they had just come, was dimly lighted by braziers swung from the ceiling. A throne or dais of dull, glimmering, metallic stuffs faced them against the opposite wall, while in a darkened corner stood the incongruous but familiar cabinet of the medium's delight. The ebony center table was a small, quaintly carved affair and upon it, on a cushion of black

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velvet, rested a huge crystal which glowed with a shimmering, opalescent radiance like some gigantic soap-bubble.

"Rex, the beard of the prophet has descended upon you!" gasped George as he stared about him. "With such an atmosphere I could drag secrets out of the Sphinx herself! If I only had had it in Peoria—! But what's behind that curtain?"

Smilingly, Rex Powell advanced to it and drew it aside, disclosing a plain office door of mahogany and frosted glass.

"It leads into the main corridor," he explained. "Yours is the only room which has a separate entrance from the outer office. I thought it advisable in the event that it became necessary to examine possible witnesses under the influence of psychic suggestion, as it were, that your sanctum should seem to have no connection with 'The Shadowers, Inc.,' next door."

George approached the table upon which the crystal rested and felt carefully down one of its legs. Then he straightened himself and a significant smile broke over his lean countenance.

"All the latest improvements," he murmured. "Brother, bring on your suspects!"

The circulars went their way and "The Shadowers, Inc.," waited expectantly, but no client presented himself at their office. Henry Corliss, reveling in his chemical laboratory, was as blissfully content as were Lucian Baynes with his books on jewels and Clifford Nichols in his scientific study of the basic forms of chirography; an art which in his case had heretofore been strictly home developed.

But Philip Howe's active brain and agile fingers were

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alike beginning to chafe under the inaction, and when he read in the papers of the robbery of a certain "safe" deposit vault, and recognized in the description of the outrage the unmistakable handiwork of two of his oldtime associates, he began to ask himself disgustedly why he had fallen for this fantastic scheme.

George Roper wore a more lugubrious air than ever, and even the leader of the new enterprise began to lose heart, although he would not admit it even to himself.

The days lengthened into a fortnight and early one sultry August morning as they all sat together in Rex Powell's six-sided sanctum, Philip remarked:

"Say, Rex, we haven't had even a sign of a case yet, so you could hardly say that we had started in business. Couldn't I just go out and hunt up some of the live ones and turn one little trick? You know, I could go and work up trade for you!" he added brightly. "Say the word and to-morrow I'll bring you such a bunch of some nervous old lady's sparklers that you'll have her visiting card chased down here by the butler within an hour. You can monkey around for a few days and then return them to her and get the reward. What's fairer than that? She'll recommend her friends, too, and that will start the ball rolling. As long as restitution and not prosecution is your aim, I don't mind being the goat."

Powell shook his head.

"This is not a new kind of graft, but a legitimate business," he reminded his eager confrère. "We must wait until work comes to us in a legitimate way."

"I might at least do some legitimate business," George sighed. "What with the credulous populace seething about

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us and all that gorgeous paraphernalia in there going to waste I could clean up, as our young friend Phil would say. If you would listen to me, Rex, and let me put that mystic Indian sign on my door—"

"And hang an Indian sign on the whole concern," Clifford Nichols interrupted, yawning behind his hand. "Really, Rex—"

But Rex Powell stopped him with a gesture. He was listening intently to something which had escaped their ears, and all at once he touched the invisible spring beneath the edge of his desk.

Instantly a well-modulated girlish voice came to them, clear but trembling with some all but overwhelming emotion.

"Oh, are any of the gentlemen who call themselves 'The Shadowers' in? My mother received one of their notes and I—I have brought her card. Something terrible has happened out at our house!"

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CHAPTER III

WHILE THE LIGHTS WERE OUT

SILENTLY George arose from his chair and with one hand thrust in the breast of his tightly buttoned, funereal coat he made a profound obeisance toward the panel which led to the outer office, but Rex motioned him impatiently to his seat once more, and at that instant a faint ticking sound reached their ears to mingle with Miss Jepson's reply.

"Card, please? One of our experts will call immediately."

"Oh, but—but could I not bring him back in the car with me?" the clear, troubled voice went on. "You see, mother wanted me to explain a little before he got there. It is all so dreadful, and we daren't even call a doctor!"

In the inner office Lucian uttered a low exclamation and all but Rex followed his gaze to the place from which the ticking sound came. Close beside the panel a tiny slit, like those in a slot machine, had appeared in what seemed to be the solid wall and through it a narrow ribbon of paper was unwinding itself rapidly.

Lucian glanced toward their leader and at a nod from the latter, he moved over to the slit and, taking up the strip of paper, he read the message to the end as though glancing over a stock report. Then, as the part which issued now from the aperture was blank he tore off the first length

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and spread it out on the table. Upon it in small typed characters they read:

"Swell flapper scared stiff been crying trying to be up stage but lost her nerve smart clothes thrown on anyhow only one glove pumps don't match guess about twenty name on card Mrs. Horace Punderford."

They gazed questioningly at Rex as the unique description impressed itself upon them, but the voice of Miss Jepson came once more.

"Well, it isn't usual but I'll see if the head of the firm will talk to you."

"Oh, please do! Tell him we will pay anything if he will only be—be discreet as he promised in the note, and will help us out of this awful affair!"

The ticker had run and stopped again and as before Lucian tore off the strip and brought it to the table.

"Going to cry I'll get what dope I can and phone."

Then the voice of the indefatigable Miss Jepson:

"It's really against the rules. I have instructions not to bother him if the case is a trivial one—"

"Trivial?" came the softer voice, sobbing now. "When m-my father has gone insane and the s-safe is open and there's a d-dead—! But I can't tell you; I mustn't!—P-please tell the h-head of the firm that I m-must see him."

The circle about the table gripped the arms of their chairs and stared at one another with relaxed jaws.

"The safe!" muttered Phil in an ecstasy. "Lead me to it!"

The telephone at Rex's elbow whirred and as he lifted the receiver Miss Jepson announced in a highly artificial tone:

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"There is a young lady here with a card from Mrs. Horace Punderford, sir. She says that Mrs. Punderford received one of our notes and that the matter is urgent. The young lady wishes to consult you personally now."

"Mrs. Punderford? Wait till I consult our files, Miss Jepson. I will call you."

Then while the others gaped at their leader they were suddenly plunged into darkness which was slowly superseded by a soft glow like sunlight through rose-colored curtains. From a drawer in the lower section of the filing case Rex drew a rose-colored cloth of some silky material and flung it over the somber table. The Spanish leather screen in the corner, turned about, revealed a delicate tapestry, all downy clouds and dainty shepherdesses, and from behind it Rex brought forth a tall, slender vase containing some cherry blossoms, so perfect that one could have sworn they were real. This he placed upon the table and moving swiftly about the room turned the gloomy, dull-toned prints with their faces to the wall upon which they hung. In their places smiling landscapes and sunny water scenes appeared, and in a trice the office was changed from that of a rather sumptuous but depressing consulting room to a charming apartment where the most highly strung woman might find repose of spirit.

His companions had followed his maneuvers in wordless astonishment, but Lucian could contain himself no longer.

"Wonderful, Rex! I don't quite gather the reason for this transformation, but just these few touches have made all the difference in the world! Jove, it looks like a lady's bower!"

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"Some quick-change artist!" Phil supplemented. "What's the big idea, Rex?"

The magician who had performed the miracle turned to his confrères with a low laugh.

"I'm just applying a little of George's psychology only in a slightly different manner," he explained. "There is a young girl outside, agitated, in deep trouble and perhaps distrustful of us. If she walked into a stiff, awe-inspiring, cold office with an atmosphere of impersonal professionalism, would it not daunt her spirit, cause her to become embarrassed and make her still more reluctant to give her confidence? As it is her eyes light upon things of beauty and charm, reassuringly feminine touches here and there, and a soothing sense of peace and mental ease and well-being will steal insensibly over her perturbed mind in this soft, rosy glow."

"It's got my psychology beaten a mile," George assevérated. "Whatever put such an idea into your head? It's immense!"

"When I was planning this organization I realized that the type of people who would become our clients would not be of the general run; that although they came voluntarily they would come reluctantly, distrustfully, fearing notoriety above all things and determined not to give us any more information than was absolutely necessary in their eyes. In other words, they would be cautious, self-conscious, tense, and laboring under the stress of deep emotion, whether anger, fear, grief or vengeance. I worked out a scheme of the different main types into which people of the class I sought for clients might be divided, and the sort

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of atmosphere which would be most conducive to confidence from them. I then arranged that this room might by a few simple changes such as you have just seen be made into a psychologically perfect atmosphere for each of them, and I depend upon Miss Jepson's description, as you have also seen, to guide me in my choice of scenic effect. Now," Rex added in a changed tone, "there is a table in each of your studies. If you haven't discovered it yet, look for the little spring concealed beneath the edge; press it, and you will be able to hear all that is said in here."

"But what is that ticker business?" demanded George. "If that isn't like the old poolroom days—!"

"Haven't time to explain now, but Miss Jepson holds a tiny, noiseless keyboard concealed upon her lap, and types off with one hand her personal impressions of the prospective client. The reel of paper is automatically wound out through that aperture in the wall to me. I told her to put her impressions in her own words and I find them illuminating. But go each of you to your own study and listen and wait. If I need your actual presence a buzzer will sound."

Scarcely had they vanished through the several panels when Rex took up the receiver once more.

"I am disengaged now, Miss Jepson. Will you show the young lady in, please?"

The panel leading to the outer office slid aside, disclosing a slender girl whose youth was as obvious as her breeding. She was clad all in white, yet no whiter were her garments than the little face which must have been undeniably pretty under normal circumstances. Now her light brown hair

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was disordered and her soft, blue eyes were swollen and glittered with unshed tears. There was a hint of firmness in the little square chin, but at the moment of her appearance her lips were trembling woefully.

Then all at once The Shadowers in their various offices had a remarkable demonstration of the soundness of their leader's psychology. The girl halted, her eyes widened with wonder as they roved about the room, a hint of color crept into her pale cheeks and her lips broke into a wavering smile.

"Why, how—how lovely!" she breathed. "I—I never thought—! Oh, what a *darling* screen!"

As she silenced herself in swift confusion, Rex rose.

"Come in." He smiled encouragingly and pushed forward a low chair. "Mrs. Horace Punderford sent you, I believe?"

She nodded, wetting her lips with the tip of her small pink tongue.

"She is my mother. I—I was terribly afraid to come here at first but it doesn't seem at all dreadful now. The atmosphere here—why, it's almost like my own room at home!" The girl paused and then added: "Terrible things happened at our home last night!—Terrible, mysterious things for which no one can account!"

"Why did your mother not communicate with us immediately?" asked Rex.

"She—she didn't know what to do! We were all distracted, nearly as insane as my poor father seems to have become! It was only toward morning that she remembered your card, Mr.—?"

"Powell," Rex supplied. "Please tell me what these

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terrible things were which occurred at your home, Miss Punderford."

"Oh, can't I tell you in the car? It is waiting outside and every moment is precious! I—I know you are the head of the firm, but we need the very best help that we can obtain, and if you cannot render it to us, no one can! We must have absolute secrecy; I don't quite understand why, but mother will explain that to you, and—and she would give almost all we possess to have this terrible affair hushed up and the mystery of it all solved."

"The question of terms can be arranged later, and I am quite willing to accompany you, Miss Punderford, but I do not work alone. We have experts in every line of possible investigation, criminal and otherwise, and I must decide whom to bring with me." Rex paused. "Just tell me the main events which occurred last night without detail and I shall know what to do."

The girl sat silent for a minute biting her lips and then the words came in a little rush.

"My father went suddenly mad and began raving like a maniac, poor Aunt Selina has had a stroke or something—father's safe has been robbed and there is a man—a stranger—lying dead on the library floor! He must have been one of the burglars, I think, although I only caught one glimpse of him before Alan dragged me away!"

"But my dear Miss Punderford, tell me the sequence of events!" Rex himself was staggered by the strange, incoherent story. "Your father perhaps discovered that the safe had been robbed and the shock—?"

Miss Punderford shook her head.

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"It all happened at once," she replied, "while the lights were out."

"During the night, you mean?" Rex persisted. "Or had the electricity been short-circuited in some way?"

"No. We were holding a séance. Aunt Selina is a spiritualist, and mother and father are getting to be, too. We were all holding hands around the dining-room table in the dark when all at once there came a sound of something falling in the library. I don't know who turned the lights on again but it was then that Aunt Selina became insensible and father began to rave and—and we found the body."

"What has become of it?"

"Oh, it is still there! Mother insisted on locking the library and refused to call the police or even a doctor for father, he was saying such queer, awful things! But something must be done at once, of course, or the servants, faithful as they are to us, may learn what has occurred and tell."

"Your mother locked the library without stopping to find out what had been taken from the safe, Miss Punderford?"

"Oh, yes, but I don't think father kept anything of value there. That is the odd part of it. All his securities and things were down-town at his office."

"Your car is not a limousine, surely, at this time of year?" Rex shot the seemingly irrelevant question at her and the girl eyed him for a moment in surprise before she replied:

"No. It is an open touring car."

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"Does your chauffeur know everything that occurred last night?"

"Heavens, no! None of the servants know a thing about the—the library or why it is locked! They think it was the séance which frightened poor father and Aunt Selina into fits, and although they are steady, matter-of-fact people who have been in our employ for ages, they are very badly frightened, too. I shouldn't wonder if the cook, at least, gives notice. But what made you ask about the chauffeur, Mr. Powell?"

"To impress upon you the fact that nothing save the séance itself and a few casual questions I may put to you must be discussed in the car. I think I have learned enough facts concerning the burglary to go upon until I can obtain a detailed statement from Mrs. Punderford."

Rex pressed three buttons rapidly on his desk.

"Have you room in your car for three of my associates as well as ourselves?" he queried.

"Oh, yes. It is a seven passenger—"

She paused as three panels opened unexpectedly and three gentlemen of widely different types appeared.

"Miss Punderford, may I present Doctor Corliss? He will diagnose the cases of your father and aunt, examine the body in the library and dispose of it without publicity, if the man's death was a natural one and your mother requests its private removal. This gentleman is Mr. Howe, our expert on safes, and Mr. Roper is a special investigator. We will accompany Miss Punderford to her home, and I would suggest that you take her down to the car, while I leave a few instructions here."

Scarcely had they departed when Lucian Baynes stalked

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into the consulting room tweaking his small blond mustache with an injured air.

"I say, that was confoundedly mean of you, old chap! I heard the girl say that the car was a seven passenger. Why can't we all be in at the death?"

"Because there is nothing in your line connected with the case, Luce, as far as we know yet." Rex pressed a button which started the buzzer in Clifford's study. "If anything turns up concerning jewels or papers which may have been stolen from the safe I will send for you both at once. —Cliff," he turned, as that individual sauntered in and pretended to be oblivious to the look of reproach cast upon him, "please get out the files for me like a good fellow and look up Punderford, so that you can give me a line on him if it is necessary for me to send for you. There is something listed about every one of the thousand men and women we sent those circulars to. And be prepared for a message from me at any moment. This looks as though it were going to be *some* case!"

Leaving two very much disgruntled colleagues behind, Rex passed through the panel to the outer office and ascertained from the card left with Ethel Jepson that the Punderford residence was on the upper Drive. He evaded the young woman's eager questions with a hasty, laughing rejoinder and descended to the waiting car.

Miss Punderford greeted him with a little cry of impatience.

"Oh, I thought that you were never coming!" she exclaimed. "Please forgive me, but mother will be almost beside herself. You see, she made a point of insisting that all our guests of last night should remain until you or some

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one from your firm should come, and I am afraid that Audrey is going to be rather nasty about it, for she meant to catch a train this morning and now she has lost it. She is a dear, but then last night's horrors upset her nerves frightfully, and she and mother had quite a scene because—"

She paused in sudden confusion with a quick glance toward the chauffeur.

"Who is 'Audrey,' Miss Punderford?" Rex asked. "Tell us who your guests were last evening, please."

"Audrey is Mrs. Audrey Fraser. I had forgotten that you did not know." The girl had regained a little of her composure and she spoke in a more steady, formal tone. "She came with Mr. Stephen Leacraft for dinner and to attend the séance. They are both old friends of ours. Mr. Goodhue was there, too."

A faint blush spread over her pale face at the mention of the last name and Philip nudged Rex significantly as they swayed with the swiftly moving car.

"These three were the only persons present except the immediate members of your family?" Rex coldly ignored his irrepressible associate.

"Oh, there was a friend of father's who is staying with us, Mr. Scaynes. He is very much interested in spiritualism and table levitation and all that sort of thing. He's quite old."

"Was it he who arranged for the séance last evening, my child?" George Roper's tones were blandly paternal, but a peculiar light had dawned in his eyes.

"He and Aunt Selina together, I believe. I don't know

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much about such things and since last night I never want to hear about them again as long as I live!"

There was a trace of hysteria in her voice once more, and Rex asked hastily:

"Your family consists only of your father, mother, aunt and yourself?"

Miss Punderford nodded.

"That is all since my brother died. Mother believes she is receiving messages from him."

"And the household servants?"

"We have only a few with us; the rest are down at our country home on Long Island. You see, we ran in town for a fortnight so that father could have his eyes treated. He has had a great deal of trouble with them lately and the doctor thought that an immediate operation might be necessary if they did not respond to treatment. But I have not answered your question, Mr. Powell. Mickens the butler is with us, of course, and the cook and kitchenmaid and housemaid. Fortunately my mother's personal maid Mona came yesterday with some things which had been forgotten, for she was a great help to us all last night. Williams," she nodded toward the chauffeur's stolid, impersonal back which was presented to them, "sleeps over the garage, and his family are down at the Long Island place."

Remembering Powell's warning, she had lowered her voice and now silence fell upon them until they had swept in at a pair of square stone gate-posts and under a spacious porte-cochère.

A pompous, elderly man in the conventional black of the

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house-servant held the door already open for them, and as Miss Punderford alighted she asked anxiously:

"Any change, Mickens?"

"No, miss." The butler coughed deprecatingly and eyed the strangers somewhat askance. "Mrs. Punderford requests that you go immediately upstairs, miss. She will see the gentlemen at once in the drawing-room."

He accepted their hats and would have taken possession of the small black bag which "Dr." Corliss bore, but the latter clung to it tenaciously.

"Never mind that, my man," he announced. "I am a physician, and it contains some remedies which must not be jarred."

"Quite so, sir." Mickens threw open the doors of the drawing-room with markedly increased respect. "Mrs. Punderford will receive you in a moment."

From force of habit Philip Howe glanced about him with professional interest, but Rex drew George aside.

"We'll divide this up," he announced rapidly. "You interview this man Scaynes while Henry is examining the body in the library and trying to discover what the trouble is with the aunt and Punderford himself. All this after we have listened to Mrs. Punderford's story, of course."

"I understand," George responded. "Phil's job is the safe exclusively, but I feel that Mr. Scaynes is my meat."

There was time for no more, for a slow, dragging step sounded upon the stairs and the drawing-room curtains parted. A tall, majestic looking woman stood before them, her manner a curious mixture of hauteur and appeal. Her iron-gray hair rose in immaculate waves from her forehead, but no amount of cosmetics, however skillfully ap-

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plied, could mask the drawn, tragic look upon her face, and she clung to the curtain for a moment as though to brace herself for the coming interview.

The next instant her hand fell to her side and she advanced.

"My daughter tells me that the head of your firm himself has come to my assistance in this crisis," she observed, glancing from one to another of them. "May I ask which—?"

"I am Mr. Powell, Mrs. Punderford, and very much at your service." Rex introduced his colleagues and added: "Your daughter has given us a list of your household and the guests you entertained last night; she has also told us enough of what occurred to bring us swiftly here. Other of our colleagues may be summoned as they are required, but now we should like to have a detailed statement from you so that we may start our investigation at once. I need not repeat the assurance given in the little note which was sent to you of our absolute discretion, and the fact that nothing shall reach the authorities except by your own command."

"Thank you, Mr. Powell." She seated herself and motioned them to chairs.

"I fear that I can give you a scarcely more coherent account of what occurred than my daughter's must have been, for it was all so sudden and coming as it did at a moment when we were keyed up to the highest pitch of emotional excitement made the full horror all the more poignant. It must have been about eleven o'clock when we left the drawing-room here and going to the dining-room seated ourselves about the table and holding each other's hands in an

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unbroken chain strove to concentrate our minds to receive any message which might come to us. My husband, my sister Miss Hornbottle, our guest Mr. Scaynes and myself are all devout believers in spiritualism and we have had many manifestations from those who have passed on, but last night there seemed to be evil influences at work, and we could obtain no result."

She gazed at her auditors half defiantly, and George Roper spoke in soothing, sympathetic tones.

"I am told that is frequently the case when skeptics are in the circle. The lights were out, of course?"

Mrs. Punderford assented with a gesture.

"Who turned them out, if I may ask?" It was Rex who put the question.

"Mildred, my daughter. She sat nearest the switch. We must have been seated there, tense and wrought up to the most sensitive mental state for twenty minutes or more, when a queer, choking cry came to us from the direction of the library, which opens from the dining-room. We were paralyzed for a moment and then there came the sound of a heavy fall, not violent, but as though some one had gradually sunk down, relaxed. That broke the tension, and Mr. Scaynes sprang up and turned on the lights just as my sister screamed and slipped from her chair, insensible. My daughter cried out and Alan—young Mr. Goodhue—stopped to comfort her, but Mr. Leacraft, Mr. Scaynes and my husband went into the library to discover what had fallen. Audrey—Mrs. Fraser—was aiding me in my efforts to revive my sister and in my anxiety for her I was preoccupied to the extent that I did not hear what was taking place in the library until my husband suddenly gave

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a strange cry and flung his hands up and out before him as though he were trying to force something back. At least that was his attitude when I reached the library door. Then I saw that his safe was open and a man's body lay as if collapsed upon the floor near one of the French windows, which leads to a narrow balcony. This window was open and just before it was a small black bag, its contents —which consisted of a collection of steel tools—scattered all about. I advanced to approach him, but Mr. Scaynes drew me back. At that instant I heard a hideous, raucous cry behind me, more like that of a wild beast than a human being!" Mrs. Punderford paused, shuddering, and when she spoke again her voice was shaken and very low. "I turned to find that the strange sound had issued from my husband's lips. Mr. Leacraft was holding him, but he was struggling fearfully, and one look at his face showed me the appalling truth. He had gone mad!"

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CHAPTER IV

"ARE you sure, Mrs. Punderford?" Rex asked quickly. "Might it not have been just a momentary frenzy of rage at finding that he had been robbed?"

She shook her head but a slight change had come over her face and her eyes narrowed as if in swift caution.

"There was foam upon his lips and he kept flinging out his arms as though into immeasurable space, then turning them so that his hands were thrown palms outward and drawing them back in an indescribable way, almost as if some one or something were forcing them back. His eyes looked strange and dilated with fear and horror. He was not looking at the—the safe but into space and he did not know me or any of us!"

"Was his gesture something like this, madam?" In the excitement of his interest Henry had risen from his chair and his plump arms were working in a manner which would have been comic under less tense circumstances. "You say he seemed at first to be flinging his arms out into space; was he not rather appearing to be reaching out after something which eluded him?"

"My poor husband's crazed gesture may have been something like that. I cannot find words to describe it other than I have used, and I was naturally all but distraught at

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the moment, Dr. Corliss. He was assisted to his room by Mr. Leacraft and Mr. Scaynes while I drew myself together sufficiently to quiet the perturbation of the butler, who had appeared at the foot of the staircase, and dismiss him for the night."

"And then you locked the door of the library, Mrs. Punderford?" suggested George Roper significantly.

Mrs. Punderford flushed slightly.

"I wanted time to think what to do to avoid the almost inevitable scandal and notoriety which must ensue." She nodded. "It was only during the later hours of the night that I recalled your note and decided to put the case in your hands. I returned to the dining-room to find that my daughter had recovered from her hysteria and with Mr. Goodhue's assistance Mrs. Fraser and I succeeded in getting my unconscious sister to her room, where she has remained in a comatose condition ever since in spite of all our efforts to arouse her."

"Your husband, is he still suffering from his seeming delusions?" asked Henry.

"No. Toward morning he fell into a heavy sleep from which he has not awakened. If you would care to see him now—"

"I think, since both the patients are unconscious for the present, I would prefer to make my examination of the body in the library first," Henry interrupted smoothly. "You are quite sure that nothing has been disturbed there?"

"Quite," Mrs. Punderford responded, her lips tightening once more as if the suggestion were for some reason unwelcome, but she rose promptly. "I have the key here and I will show you the way."

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It was Rex Powell who held out a deferentially detaining hand.

"Just a moment, Mrs. Punderford. Have you informed any of your guests yet as to who we are or why we are here?"

"No one knows but my daughter, not even the servants." She gazed wonderingly at him.

"Then, not only for your better protection against gossip and possible scandal, but because it is the only way our organization works we prefer to be known in other than our true characters. In fact, it is only under this condition that we can accept the case."

The others gazed at him in no less wonder, for it was the first they had heard of this decision of their leader, but Mrs. Punderford gestured helplessly.

"But how can that possibly be arranged, Mr. Powell? I have detained my dinner guests of last evening, some of them unwillingly, until your arrival simply in order that you may question them. Then there is our house guest, Mr. Scaynes. He will be sure to observe you at your investigation, to say nothing of the servants!"

"Our special investigator here, Mr. Roper, can interview any one of your guests whom he may choose without arousing their suspicions, if you will present him as one of your husband's old-time business friends, for whom you have sent because of his sudden illness," Rex responded easily. "Your own doctor may have been called out of town on an unexpected case and have sent our Dr. Corliss, which would account for his presence. If you can slip him, Mr. Howe and myself into the library now, we can remain there until your guests have departed. I understand that one of them,

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Mrs. Fraser, is anxious to leave in order to catch a train. I shall be able to manage the servants without their learning too much. Will you tell us your first name, please?"

"Luella.—But Mr. Scaynes?" Mrs. Punderford queried. "One cannot summarily eject a house guest of weeks' standing—!"

"He could be requested to go upon an urgent errand for you; to your husband's attorneys, perhaps, or better still out to your country place on Long Island in your car for some important papers which he will not be able to find there." Rex was smiling now. "That will give us time to complete our investigation here and be off before his return."

"I should like to meet them all before their departure," George remarked. "A few words, alone or collectively with them, are all that I shall require for the moment. You can, of course, give me their addresses should it be necessary for me to interview them later."

"We-ell, I presume that can be managed, and I promised to place the case absolutely in your hands," Mrs. Punderford replied somewhat doubtfully. "I will return and present them to you at once."

She led the way and Rex, Henry and Phil Howe filed out in her wake.

George pursued the vanishing quartette with an oddly quizzical gaze. Mrs. Punderford's explanation of the locked library door had plainly been a mere subterfuge—to use his own mental colloquialism, she was "holding out on them"—and if he could not learn the truth from one of her guests he meant to wring the inner facts from that lady herself if he had to resort to a psychological third de-

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gree more searching than any to which he had subjected his gullible clients in the days of his fake spiritualism.

And here, too, lay his present client's weakness. He did not make the mistake of underrating her intelligence or well poised self-control, but her predilection for spiritualism might be turned to good account if the necessity arose.

An inspiration came to him and he arose and went to the desk telephone which he had descried in a shadowed corner of the huge drawing-room.

Lifting the receiver cautiously, he gave the number of "The Shadowers" headquarters.

In an incredibly short space of time the matter-of-fact tones of Ethel Jepson came to him over the wire.

"Ethel, this is Mr. Roper speaking. I want you to go into my study and look under the skull—"

"Me?" The interruption came with emphasis. "Excuse me, Mr. Roper, but I ain't exactly pinin' to fondle that thing."

"I didn't ask you to touch it, my dear child." A dry chuckle emanated from George's usually solemn lips. "I mean, look in the stand beneath it and you will find a small collection of books. Take out two of them; one is a list of gentlemen who were in my former profession, a small green leather volume. The other is a still smaller one bound in black cloth and labeled 'Code.' Do you know what a 'code' is, Ethel?"

"Something like a puzzle?" she replied quickly. "I'll say I do! I never worked one but I'll tackle it if you say so! What's the stunt?"

"Take down quickly the seven letters I am going to give

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you." He spoke with a lack of hesitation born of long practice. "S—E—O—U—E—H—S. Got that? Repeat it, please. . . . Yes, that's correct. Now look up code number three in the little book and see if you can dope out what those letters mean. It won't sound like anything to you, but see if you can find the resulting word in the other book. If you can, ring me up here and let me know what it says in connection with that word. Better ring me up even if you fail, and tell me."

"I'll do that little thing, Mr. Roper. Anything else?"

"No. Good-by."

He rang off not any too easy in his mind that he had trusted the harum-scarum bit of femininity at the office in this emergency, but there had been no help for it. If she were clever enough to work out the code without the key, and could apply it the truth at the immediate moment would be invaluable to him.

His meditations were interrupted by the reëntrance of Mrs. Punderford. She was accompanied by a slender, red-haired woman in her early thirties, the curve of whose lips and latent twinkle in her blue eyes suggested a sense of humor, albeit of a cynical, worldly sort. They were followed by a well-built man of about forty, with prematurely graying hair and the affable manner of a prosperous business man. Behind them in the doorway a slender youth had paused.

"Audrey, may I present Horace's old friend, Mr. Roper. Mrs. Fraser—Mr. Leacraft, Mr. Goodhue; Mr. Roper," Mrs. Punderford announced glibly. "Mr. Roper is almost as anxious about Horace as I am, and I am sure you will

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be willing to give him the details of what happened last night; I was too agitated to tell him more than the merest outline."

"I am sorry to trouble you about this terrible thing," George began apologetically as soon as their hostess had departed. "But what I was able to gather from Luella seemed so mysterious, so awful that I felt for poor Horace's sake I must know all about it. I should like to help them both if I could."

"It was devil's work, Mr. Roper, if you ask me!" Young Alan Goodhue had advanced from the doorway.

"Nonsense!" Mrs. Fraser retorted crisply. "Mrs. Punderford told you of the séance, did she not, Mr. Roper? Miss Hornbottle was all wrought up by it—she believes in that sort of thing implicitly, you know—and it is my opinion that she has been simply frightened out of her wits. A burglary is not an unprecedented occurrence even in the best regulated of families, and personally I see nothing mysterious about the whole affair except Mr. Punderford's seizure, if you choose to call it that. No doubt a medical examination will disclose the cause of it."

"Why was a physician not summoned before this?" George asked of the others in general, but again it was the lady who replied.

"I haven't the least idea." Her eyes were as blandly inscrutable as those of a cat. "We suggested sending for one, of course, but if you are an old friend of the family, you will realize that Mrs. Punderford is a rather dominant person and she wouldn't hear of it. I fancy she supposed that her sister was merely in a faint and Mr. Punderford

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beside himself because of the burglary. There is really nothing more that I can tell you."

"And I have been detaining you!" George spoke with well-simulated remorse. "I know that you must make your train—"

"My train has gone." The lady shrugged. "In any event I have given up my trip. Last night's scene has unnerved me too much for traveling. I don't mean the séance; that was merely ridiculous. But the hideous interruption, the discovery of the burglary and the effect upon Miss Hornbottle and Mr. Punderford! It was positively harrowing!"

"Then if you have time will you tell me about it, please?" George insisted.

"Oh, we sat there in the dark around the dining-room table holding hands in the most idiotic manner when that noise came from the library and somebody switched on the lights just as Miss Hornbottle fainted. I went to her assistance naturally and I was too busy attending to her to note anything that went on in the library until Mr. Punderford cried out in that dreadful way and then Mr. Leacraft and Mr. Scaynes carried him out raving between them. Then Mrs. Punderford came out and locked the library door—"

"Now, I wonder why she did that?" George interrupted meditatively, as if to himself.

"Really, Mr. Roper, you will have to ask her that question." Mrs. Fraser shrugged again. "Perhaps the safe was still open and she didn't wholly trust the servants. Mr. Leacraft can tell you what went on in the library. If you will excuse me now I think I will go home. Please tell Mrs. Punderford to let me know if there is anything I can

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do for her in her trouble. I shall remain in town indefinitely and I shall hope to hear from her."

When the adieux had been said and Mrs. Fraser left the room, George turned to the elder of the two men, who had not yet spoken save to acknowledge the introduction, and asked for his version of the affair.

Mr. Leacraft spoke in a hearty, frank tone and his description of the séance and its abrupt termination differed in no way from the others. It was evident that he, too, held the same views on spiritualism as those of Mrs. Fraser, and looked upon the experiment of the evening more in the light of a joke than anything else.

"Really, Mr. Roper," he remarked in evident extenuation of his attitude, "I don't mean any disrespect to my hostess' opinion, but I am a broker, and although we occasionally entertain hunches on the market, I can scarcely accredit them to the spirit world! To tell you the truth I was getting confoundedly bored with the whole proceeding when that sound of a cry and a falling body came and Scaynes switched on the light."

"You and he were the first to reach the library, were you not?" George recognized the type of man with whom he had to deal and came to the point without preamble.

"I fancy Punderford was ahead of us; he sat nearest the door. As I crossed the threshold I saw that the safe was open and he was staring down into it, but my eye was caught by the chap lying on the floor over by the window. Must have been the burglar, of course, or one of them, for his kit of tools lay beside him and although he was lying on his back, you couldn't see his face, because his arms were crossed over it. I think he must have been young,

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however, for his cap had fallen or been pushed off the back of his head, and his hair was brown and curly. I noticed that much as I started toward him, but Scaynes passed me and a queer, choking sound from Punderford made me pause. It was an odd sort of cry and as he uttered it Mrs. Punderford rushed in, saw the body and approached it, but Scaynes drew her back and then poor old Punderford went mad! I don't know what else to call it; he raved for hours but you couldn't make anything out of what he said. At least it didn't seem to have any possible connection with the robbery; the poor old boy seemed to be in sheer terror but of what or whom it was impossible to tell."

"What were his words? Can you recall any of them, Mr. Leacraft?"

"Well, I can't imagine what he was trying to get at, and in a way he seemed to be contradicting himself, for at one moment he would cry out: 'Take them away! Oh, God, take them away!' and the horror and fear in his voice was like nothing I have ever heard before!" Stephen Leacraft shivered. "Gad, it was enough to unnerve a chap just to listen to him! Then he would mutter: 'They're receding. They're opening out! I can't even feel them. What does it mean?' That was when he would stretch out his arms and he seemed to have the strength of ten men; it was all Scaynes and I could do to hold him down in bed. With the very next breath he would draw his arms back and scream: 'They're crushing me! I can't breathe!' That is all I can remember, but it is pretty average incoherent, don't you think?"

"Holy—!" George caught himself up hastily in his first unguarded slip and passed his handkerchief across his face.

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He emerged from behind it as urbane and inscrutable as ever.

"Extremely incoherent, my dear Mr. Leacraft, but one never can tell what form delirium brought on by sudden shock will take.—My poor old friend! I can only hope that this attack will be but a passing seizure. I have heard him mention the safe here at home frequently but I was under the impression that he kept merely family trinkets in it; I know for a fact that his securities and more valuable documents are in his office. Have you any idea what the safe in the library here contains?"

Mr. Leacraft raised his eyebrows slightly.

"I have never heard it discussed, Mr. Roper," he responded. "Mrs. Punderford will doubtless tell you when she is more calm."

Before George could reply the telephone in the corner buzzed softly, and he rose in a haste scarcely in keeping with his air of magisterial dignity.

"If you will pardon me, I think that is for me. I am expecting a message—!" He strode over to the instrument and as he removed the receiver a clear young voice came to him in gaminesque derision."

"That you, Mr. Roper? Say, I could do puzzles like that when I was a kid! I got the name, all right, but he ain't on your private social register."

"Are you sure that you did get the—er—word that I sent you correctly?" George spoke anxiously but in a guarded tone.

"I'll say I did! Code three is just the one sentence about a ghost walkin', isn't it?—'One who has passed on is among us.' It didn't mean anything to me at first except a shiver

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down my back, but I knew there must be some comeback to it, so I began counting the letters and when I found out that there were just twenty-six in the whole sentence the rest was easy! I put 'A' under 'O', 'B' under 'N', and the rest of it down the line of the whole alphabet, then picked out the letters you sent me—"

"That's enough!" George interrupted when she paused to take a breath. "You have done very well, very well indeed, but—er—good—!"

"Oh, you needn't worry!" Ethel announced serenely. "Maybe you didn't take the trouble to find out when you called me that that wire you're talkin' on is a private one, but I did! Good-by."

The perspiration was starting on George's brow as he turned back to Stephen Leacraft and took up the conversation at the point where it had been broken off. That bright little devil had solved the code all right, but what if the others had heard her shrill young voice?

"As you say, Mr. Leacraft, Mrs. Punderford will undoubtedly enlighten me. She will have to take an inventory and check off what is missing, of course, before the authorities come—that is, providing that she knows the contents of the safe herself," George observed. "I gathered from the charming lady who has just left us, Mrs. Fraser, that she herself has not been informed of the body which was found in the library?"

"No. She was unnerved enough by the burglary and what immediately ensued without being told of that hideous discovery, and then, too, Mrs. Punderford had enjoined us all to silence. We felt obliged to humor her because of her distraught condition, although we may possibly be com-

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pounding a felony, or accessories after the fact or whatever it is that the legal chaps call it. Mrs. Punderford told her daughter and Miss Punderford told Mr. Goodhue, here, I believe"—he paused, smiling at the young man who reddened slightly—"but aside from us no one knows except Mr. Scaynes, who was in the library with us, you know."

"I don't think I know Mr. Scaynes," George spoke reflectively. "I've heard Horace speak of him often, though. He must be a mighty interesting man."

Even though his tone was slow and drawling, the man who had worked a shell game in the side show of a country circus in his early days had lost nothing of his lightning quickness of vision and while his mild eyes appeared to be looking meditatively down at his long, slender, interlocked fingers he had darted one swift, keen glance at the face of Stephen Leacraft and noted the frown which passed over it.

"If you are Mrs. Punderford's adviser in this crisis, Mr. Roper, cannot you persuade her to send for the police at once?" Leacraft asked irrelevantly. "With that man lying murdered—or dead, anyway—in there all these hours she is placing herself and every one who was present in a desperately awkward position."

"Oh, I don't know," George demurred. "It could easily be explained that every one's attention had been centered on the safe and no one had noticed the body over in the corner, but the authorities must be informed now, of course. I will try to make Luella see the importance of it. She tells me that her first thought last night was to avoid the notoriety of it, for her guests as well as herself, but now she must be calm and collected enough to realize that some-

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thing must be done at once.—Why do you say 'murdered,' Mr. Leacraft?"

The question came so suddenly and in such a change of tone that for a moment the other hesitated.

"Well, I don't know exactly," he admitted frankly at last. "There was something in the pose of the body, something tense and strained. We had no time to examine it; we were up all night with Mr. Punderford, you know. I suppose I took it for granted that the scoundrel's accomplice, if he had one, had killed him; it didn't occur to me that a burglar, like any one else, might die naturally and suddenly in the pursuit of his profession."

"We will have to look into this," George said gravely, as he rose. "I won't keep you any longer, Mr. Leacraft. You will think me a tiresome old amateur detective, but I felt that I had to get all the details I could if I were to be of any help to Luella."

"Not at all." Leacraft held out his hand. "I should like to be of service myself. Look me up at the office whenever you like—you'll find me in the 'phone book—and we'll talk the case over. So long, Alan. Don't forget to tell your father about those deeds."

As his footsteps echoed down the hall, denuded of rugs for the summer, Alan Goodhue leaned forward suddenly in his chair.

"What do you make of it, sir?" he demanded.

"I don't know," George responded truthfully enough. "I can't make heads or tails of it. You remained in the dining-room, did you not, with Miss Punderford?"

The young man nodded.

"Yes, but she caught a glimpse of the body in there and

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she was awfully frightened, and then Miss Hornbottle had to faint—I wish *I* had gotten a peep into that library!" he added wistfully. "Mr. Punderford must have had something in that safe that the thieves knew about, but I've often heard Mrs. Punderford say that it was unsightly and ask him to have it removed as long as he never kept anything of value in it. What do you suppose killed that chap they found in there?"

"We will know when the police come." George turned toward the door. It was evident from the young man's questions that he knew nothing which could be of use in the investigation, and moreover George had caught the flirt of a dainty summer skirt as it passed down the hall and fancied that Mildred was waiting for Alan. He must reach her first and warn her of the status of himself and his colleagues in the house. "If you will excuse me a moment—?"

He found her standing in a curtained recess near one of the tall windows and at first he thought she was alone, but as he drew nearer he saw that she was talking to a tall, slender, dark man who turned slowly at his approach.

He would have no opportunity of warning her, and George's spirits sank; but at her first words he realized that she had already been informed.

"Mr. Scaynes, this is Mr. Roper, father's old friend of whom I have just been telling you—Uncle George," she added, "this is Mr. Scaynes."

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CHAPTER V

THE SAFE

MEANTIME, Mrs. Punderford had led her three pseudo-guests down the hall and ushered them into a spacious dining-room where monumental silver gleamed upon the sideboard, and shelves of cut glass glistened in a huge cabinet.

In the center of the room stood a massive round table and grouped about it were eight chairs, three of them overturned.

"I have permitted nothing to be disturbed," she announced. "See, everything is just as we left it."

"Will you show us exactly how the party was seated?" Rex asked.

"I sat here." Mrs. Punderford laid her hand upon the chair, the back of which was nearest the door by which they had entered. "Mr. Leacraft was on my left and Alan Goodhue on my right. Mildred was next to him, then Mr. Scaynes, Mrs. Fraser, my husband—he was nearest the library door, you see—then my sister Miss Hornbottle with Mr. Leacraft on her right, bringing up the complete circle."

"And the light-switch which Mr. Scaynes turned on—where is that?"

"There in the wall, midway between his chair and that of my daughter."

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"I see." Rex was taking in the room and all its details in a swift, comprehensive glance. "Then the overturned chairs are those of Miss Hornbottle, Mr. Punderford and Mr. Scaynes?"

"Yes; my sister fainted, you know, and my husband must have inadvertently overturned his in his anxiety to reach the library in the darkness, but Mr. Scaynes' chair is so far from the table that I fancy he must have deliberately kicked it out of his way when he rose to turn on the light."

"You are quite a detective yourself, Mrs. Punderford," Rex remarked in a pleasantly congratulatory tone. Then he walked slowly around the table scrutinizing its top and the floor beneath. "You leave your velvet carpets down in summer?"

"Only in this room. The carpet, as you see, is worn and faded in places, and in the autumn it is to be relegated to the servant's hall. It seemed scarcely worth while taking it up until then." Mrs. Punderford added in swiftly rising agitation: "But we are wasting time here! I only wanted you to see the room as it was, but in there your real work lies."

She passed around the table to the library door, inserted her key in the lock and flung it wide. For a moment she cowered upon the threshold, then drew herself up with a determined effort and stepped over the sill.

They beheld a pleasant, lofty-ceilinged room, its high walls lined with books save where the monotony was broken by the tall windows which faced them, the huge fireplace on the left and the small but heavily made safe beside it

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which stood behind a screen of ancient Spanish leather. The latter had been hastily flung aside and rested crazily against the corner of the mantel.

A long, narrow table of carved wood blackened with age was in the center of the room before the fireplace, and several great chairs stood about, while over on the floor beneath the window, where a thin but brilliant ray of sunlight streamed in upon it through a narrow fissure in the blind, lay a motionless form.

Rex and Henry Corliss advanced toward it, but Phil Howe with professional interest had gone straight to the safe and Mrs. Punderford lingered near him.

"I thought *rigor mortis* set in sooner than this," Rex muttered in an undertone as "Dr." Corliss drew the crossed arms down from the set face and they fell limply on either side of the body.

"Not always. Don't talk so loud; we don't want the old girl gasping and pulling off a faint over here! Gee! he was a tough customer for a kid, wasn't he?"

The face thus revealed to them was undeniably youthful, but bloated and lowering and seamed about the eyes and the lips—where the dropped jaw had parted them—with vicious, ugly lines. The cheeks were thin and sallow, the nose had obviously been broken at some earlier period and one "cauliflower" ear matched the other natural one only in its almost lobeless formation.

The body was clothed in a frazzled dark gray sweater, shiny trousers of some rough, nondescript material, and worn, rubber-soled boots.

"He was the real thing, all right; no fake about this

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