





THE AMATEUR INN

ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE

By

ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE

LOCHINVAR LUCK

FURTHER ADVENTURES OF LAD

BUFF: A COLLIE

THE AMATEUR INN

BLACK CÆSAR'S CLAN

BLACK GOLD

NEW YORK:

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THE AMATEUR INN

BY

ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE

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CHAPTER I

A NON-SKIPABLE PROLOGUE

OSMUN VAIL doesn't come into this story at all. Yet he was responsible for everything that happened in it.

He was responsible for the whistling cry in the night, and for the Thing that huddled among the fragrant boxtrees, and for the love of a man and a maid—or rather the loves of several men and a maid—and for the amazing and amusing and jewel-tangled dilemma wherein Thaxton was shoved.

He was responsible for much; though he was actively to blame for nothing. Moreover he and his career were interesting.

So he merits a word or two, if only to explain what happened before the rise of our story's curtain.

At this point, the boreful word, Prologue, should be writ large, with a space above and

below it, by way of warning. But that would be the sign to skip. And one cannot skip this short prologue without losing completely the tangled thread of the yarn which follows—a thread worth gripping and a yarn more or less worth telling.

So let us dispose of the prologue, without calling it by its baleful name; and in a mere mouthful or two of words. Something like this:

When Osmun Vail left his father's Berkshire farm, at twenty-one, to seek his fortune in New York, he wore his \$12 "freedom suit" and had a cash capital of \$18, besides his railway ticket.

Followed forty years of brow-sweat and brain-wrack and one of those careers whose semi-occasional real-life recurrence keeps the Success magazines out of the pure-fiction class.

When Osmun Vail came back, at sixty-one, to the Berkshire farm that had been his father's until the mortgage was foreclosed, he was worth something more than five million dollars. His life-battle had been fought and won. His tired soul yearned unspeakably for the peace and loveliness of the pleasant hill country where he had been born—the homeland he had half-forgotten and which had wholly forgotten him and his.

Osmun recalled the prim village of Stock-

bridge, the primmer town of Pittsfield, drowsing beneath South Mountain, the provincial scatter of old houses known as Lenox; the tumbled miles of mountain wilderness and the waste of lush farmland between and around them.

At sixty-one he found Pittsfield a new city; and saw a Lenox and Stockbridge that had been discovered and renovated by beauty-lovers from the distant outside world. All that region was still in the youth of its golden development. But the wave had set in, and had set in strong.

A bit dazzled and more than a little troubled by the transformation, Osmun Vail sought the farm of his birth and the nearby village of Aura. Here at least nothing had changed; except that his father's house—built by his grandfather's own gnarled hands—had burned down; taking the rattle-trap red barns with it. The whole hilltop farm lay weedgrown, rank, desolate. In the abomination of desolation, a deserted New England farm can make Pompeii look like a hustling metropolis. There is something awesome in its new deadness.

Cold fingers seemed to catch Osmun by the throat and by the heartstrings; as he stared wistfully from the house's site, to the neglected acres his grandsire had cleared and his sire had

loved. From the half-memory of a schoolday poem, the returned wanderer quoted chokingly:

“Here will I pitch my tent. Here will I end my days.”

Then on the same principle of efficient promptitude which had lifted him from store-reporter to a bank presidency, Osmun Vail proceeded to realize a dream he had fostered through the bleakly busy decades of his exile.

For a ridiculously low price he bought back and demortgaged the farm and the five hundred acres that bordered it. He turned loose a horde of landscape artists upon the domain. He sent overseas for two renowned British architects, and bade them build him a house on the hilltop that should be a glorious monument to his own success and to his father's memory. To Boston and to New York he sent, for a legion of skilled laborers. And the estate of Vailholme was under way.

Fashion, wealth, modernity, had skirted this stretch of rolling valley to northeast of Stockbridge and to south of Lenox. The straggly one-street village of Aura drowsed beneath its giant elms; as it had drowsed since a quarter-century after the Pequot wars. The splashing invasion of this moneyed New Yorker created

more neighborhood excitement than would the visit of a Martian to Brooklyn.

Excitement and native hostility to outsiders narrowed down to a very keen and very personal hatred of Osmun Vail; when it was learned that all his skilled labor and all his building material had been imported from points beyond the soft green mountain walls which hedge Aura Valley.

Now there was not a soul in the Valley capable of building any edifice more imposing or imaginative than a two-story frame house. There was no finished material in the Valley worth working into the structure of such a mansion as Osmun proposed. But this made no difference. An outlander had come back to crow over his poor stay-at-home neighbors, and he was spending his money on outside help and goods, to the detriment of the natives. That was quite enough. The tide of icy New England hate swelled from end to end of the Valley; and it refused to ebb.

These Aura folk were Americans of Puritan stock—a race to whom sabotage and arson are foreign. Thus they did not seek to destroy or even to hamper the work at Vailholme. But their aloofness was made as bitter and blighting as a Bible prophet's curse. For example:

When his great house was but half built, Osmun ran up from New York, one gray January Saturday afternoon, to inspect the job. This he did every few weeks. And, on his tours, he made headquarters at Plum's, in Stockbridge, six miles away. This was an ancient and honorable hostelry which some newfangled folk were even then beginning to call "The Red Lion Inn," and whose food was one of Life's Compensations. Thence, on a livery nag, Vail was wont to ride out to his estate.

On this January trip Osmun found that Plum's had closed, at Christmas, for the season. He drove on to Aura, only to find the village's one inn was shut for repairs. Planning to continue his quest of lodgings as far as Lenox or, if necessary, to Pittsfield, Osmun went up, through a snowstorm, to his uncompleted hilltop mansion of Vailholme.

He had brought along a lunch, annexed from the Stockbridge bakery. So interested did he become in wandering from one unceilinged room to another, and furnishing and refurnishing them in his mind, that he did not notice the steady increase of the snowfall and of the wind which whipped it into fury.

By the time he went around to the shed, at

the rear of the house, where he had stabled the livery horse, he could scarce see his hand before his face. The gale was hurling the tons of snow from end to end of the Valley, in solid masses. There was no question of holding the road or even of finding it. The horse knew that—and he snorted, and jerked back on the bit when Osmun essayed to lead him from shelter.

Every minute, the blizzard increased.

The corps of indoor laborers and their bosses had gone to their Pittsfield quarters, for Sunday. Osmun had the deserted place to himself. Swathed in his greatcoat and in a mountain of burlap, and burrowing into a bed of torn papers and paint-blotched wall-cloths, he made shift to pass a right miserable night.

By dawn the snowfall had ceased. But so had the Valley's means of entrance and of exit. The two roads leading from it to the outer world were choked breast high with solid drifts. For at least three days there could be no ingress or egress. Aura bore this isolation, philosophically. To be snowbound and cut off from the rest of the universe was no novelty to the Valley hamlet. Osmun bore it less calmly.

By dint of much skill and more persuasion, he piloted his floundering horse down the hill

and into the village. There, at the first house, he demanded food and shelter. He received neither. Neither the offer of much money nor an appeal to common humanity availed. It took him less than an hour to discover that Aura was unanimous in its mode of paying him back for his slight to its laborers. Not a house would take him in. Not a villager would sell him a meal or so much as feed his horse.

Raging impotently, Osmun rode back to his frigid and draughty hilltop mansion-shell. By the time he had been shivering there for an hour a thin little man stumped up the steps.

The newcomer introduced himself as Malcolm Creede. He had stopped for a few minutes in Aura, that morning, for provisions, and had heard the gleeful accounts of the villagers as to their treatment of the stuck-up millionaire. Wherefore, Creede had climbed the hill, in order to offer the scanty hospitality of his own farmhouse to Osmun, until such time as the roads from the Valley should be open.

Osmun greeted the offer with a delight born of chill and starvation. Leading his horse, he followed Creede across a trackless half-mile or so to a farm that nestled barrenly in a cup of

the hills. During the plungingly arduous walk he learned something of his host.

Creede was a Scotchman, who had begun life as a schoolmaster; and who had come to America, with his invalid wife, to better his fortunes. A final twist of fate had stranded the couple on this Berkshire farm. Here, six months earlier, the wife had died, leaving her heart-crushed husband with twin sons a few months old. Here, ever since, the widower had eked out a pitifully bare living; and had cared, as best he might, for his helpless baby boys. His meager homestead, by the way, had gleefully been named by luckier and more witty neighbors, "Rackrent Farm." The name had stuck.

Before the end of Osmun Vail's enforced stay at Rackrent Farm, gratitude to his host had merged into genuine friendship. The two lonely men took to each other, as only solitaries with similar tastes can hope to. Osmun guessed, though Creede denied it, that the Good Samaritan deed of shelter must rouse neighborhood animosity against the Scotchman.

Osmun guessed, and with equal correctness, that this silent and broken Scot would be bitterly offended at any offer of money payment

for his hospitality. And Vail set his own ingenuity to work for means of rewarding the kindness.

As a result, within six months Malcolm Creede was installed as manager ("factor," Creede called it) of the huge new Berkshire estate of Vailholme and was supervising work on a big new house built for him by Osmun in a corner of the estate.

Creede was woefully ignorant of business matters. Coming into a small inheritance from a Scotch uncle, he turned the pittance over to Vail for investment. And he was merely delighted—in no way suspicious—when the investments brought him in an income of preposterous size. Osmun Vail never did things by halves.

Deeply grateful, Creede threw his energy and boundless enthusiasm into his new duties. He went further. One of his twin sons he christened "Clive" for the inheritance-leaving uncle in Scotland. But the other he named "Osmun," in honor of his benefactor. Vail, much gratified at the compliment, insisted on taking over the education of both lads. The childless bachelor reveled in his rôle of fairy godfather to them.

But there was another result of Osmun Vail's

chilly vigil in the half-finished hilltop mansion. During the hour before Creede had come to his rescue the cold and hungry multimillionaire had taken a vow as solemn as it was fantastic.

He swore he would set aside not less than ten of his house's forty-three rooms for the use of any possible wayfarers who might be stranded, as he had been, in that inhospitable wilderness, and who could afford to pay for decent accommodations. Not tramps or beggars, but folk who, like himself, might come that way with means for buying food and shelter, and to whom such food and shelter might elsewhere be denied.

This oath he talked over with Creede. The visionary Scot could see nothing ridiculous about it. Accordingly, ten good rooms were allotted mentally to paying guests, and a clause in Vail's will demanded that his heirs maintain such rooms, if necessary, for the same purpose. The fact was not advertised. And during Os-
mun's quarter-century occupancy of Vailholme nobody took advantage of the chance.

During that quarter-century the wilderness's beauty attracted more and more people of means and of taste. Once-bleak hills blossomed into estates. The village of Aura became something

of a resort. The face of the whole countryside changed.

When Osmun Vail died (see, we are through with him already, though not so much as launched on the queer effects of his queerer actions!) he bequeathed to his beloved crony, Malcolm Creede, the sum of \$500,000, and a free gift of the house he had built for him, and one hundred acres of land around it.

Creede had named this big new home "Cano-bie," in memory of his mother's borderland birthplace. He still owned Rackrent Farm, two miles distant. He had taken pride, in off moments, in improving the sorry old farmhouse and bare acres into something of the quaint well-being which he and his dead wife had once planned for their wilderness home. Within a year after Vail's death Creede also died, leaving his fortune and his two homes, jointly, to his twin sons, Clive and Osmun.

The bulk of Vail's fortune—a matter of \$4,000,000 and the estate of Vailholme—went to the testator's sole living relative; his grand-nephew, young Thaxton Vail, a popular and easy-going chap who, for years, had made his home with his great-uncle.

Along with Vailholme, naturally, went the

proviso that ten of its forty-three rooms should be set aside, if necessary, for hotel accommodations.

Thaxton Vail nodded reminiscently, as he read this clause in the will. Long since, Osmun had explained its origin to him. The young fellow had promised, in tolerant affection for the oldster, to respect the whim. As nobody ever yet had taken advantage of the hotel proposition and as not six people, then alive, had heard of it, he felt safe enough in accepting the odd condition along with the gift.

CHAPTER II

AT LAST THE STORY BEGINS

AMONG the two million Americans shoved bodily into the maelstrom of the World War were Thaxton Vail and the Creede twins.

This story opens in the spring of 1919, when all three had returned from overseas service.

Aura and the summer-colony were heartily glad to have Thaxton Vail back again. He was the sort of youth who is liked very much by nine acquaintances in ten and disliked by fewer than one in ninety. But there was no such majority opinion as to the return of the two young Creedes.

The twins, from babyhood, had been so alike in looks and in outward mannerisms that not five per cent of their neighbors could tell them apart. But there all resemblance ceased.

Clive Creed was of the same general type as young Vail, who was his lifelong chum. They were much alike in traits and in tastes. They even shared—that last year before the war cut a hole in the routine of their pleasant lives—a

mutual ardor for Doris Lane, who, with her old aunt, Miss Gregg, spent her summers at Stormcrest, across the valley from Vailholme. It was the first shadow of rivalry in their chumship.

Clive and Thaxton had the same pleasantly easygoing ways, the same unforced likableness. They were as popular as any men in the hill-country's big summer colony. Their wartime absence had been a theme for genuine regret to Aura Valley.

Except in looks, Osmun Creede was as unlike his twin brother as any one could well have been. The man had every Scotch flaw and crotchet, without a single Scotch virtue. Old Osmun Vail had sized up the lad's character years earlier, when he had said in confidence to Thaxton:

"There's a white man and a cur in all of us, Thax. And some psychologist sharps say twins are really one person with two bodies. Clive got all the White Man part of that 'one person,' and my lamentable namesake got all the Cur. At times I find myself wishing he were 'the lamented Osmun Creede,' instead of only 'the lamentable Osmun Creede.' Hester Gregg says he behaves as if Edgar Allan Poe had written him and Berlioz had set him to music."

From childhood, Thaxton and this Creede twin had clashed. In the honest days of boyhood they had taken no pains to mask their dislike. In the more civil years of adolescence they had been at much pains to be courteous to each other when they met, but they tried not to meet. This avoidance was not easy; in such a close corporation as the Aura set, especially after both of them began calling over-often on Doris Lane.

Back to the Berkshires, from overseas, came the two Creedes. The community prepared to welcome Clive with open arms; and to tolerate Osmun, as of old, for the sake of his brother and for the loved memory of his father. At once Aura was relieved of one of its former perplexities. For no longer were the twins impossible to tell apart.

They still bore the most amazing likeness to each other, of course. But a long siege of trench fever had left Osmun slightly bald on the forehead and had put lines and hollows in his good-looking face and had given his wide shoulders a marked stoop. Also, a fragment of shell in the leg had left him with a slight limp. The fever, too, had weakened his eyes; and had forced him to adopt spectacles with a faintly

smoked tinge to their lenses. Altogether, he was plainly discernible, now, from his erect brother, and looked nine years older.

There was another change, too, in the brethren. Hitherto they had lived together at Canobie. On their return from the war they astonished Aura by separating. Osmun lived on at the big house. But Clive took his belongings to Rackrent Farm; and set up housekeeping there; attended by an old negro and his wife, who had worked for his father. He even transported thither the amateur laboratory where-with he and Osmun had always delighted to put-ter; and he set it up in a vacant back room of the farmhouse.

Aura was thrilled at these signs of discord in the hitherto inseparable brethren. Clive had been the only mortal to find good in Osmun and to care for his society. Now, apparently, there had been a break.

But almost at once Aura found there had been no break. The twins were as devoted as ever, despite their decision to live two miles apart. They were back and forth, daily, at each other's homes; and they wrought, side by side, with all their old zeal, in the laboratory.

Osmun's cantankerous soul did not seem to

have undergone any purifying process from war experience and long illness. Within a month after he came back to Aura he proceeded to celebrate his return by raising the rents of the seven cottages he and Clive owned; and by a twenty per cent cut in the pay of the Canobie laborers.

Aura is not feudal Europe. Nor had Osmun Creede any of the hereditary popularity or masterliness of a feudal baron. Wherefore the seven tenants prepared to walk out of their rent-raised homes. The Canobie laborers, to a man, went on strike. Aura applauded. Osmun sulked.

Clive came to the rescue, as ever he had done when his brother's actions had aroused ill-feeling. He rode over to Canobie and was closeted for three hours with Osmun. Servants, passing the library, heard and reported the hum of arguing voices. Then Clive came out and rode home. Next morning Osmun lowered the rents and restored wages to their old scale. As usual, the resultant popularity descended on Clive and not upon himself.

It was a week afterward that Thaxton Vail chanced to meet Osmun at the Aura Country Club. Osmun stumped up to him, as Vail sat on the veranda rail waiting for Doris Lane to come to the tennis courts.

"I was blackballed, yesterday, by the Stockbridge Hunt Club," announced Creede, with no other salutation.

"I'm sorry," said Thaxton, politely.

"I hear, on good authority, that it was you who blackballed me," continued Osmun, his spectacled eyes glaring wrathfully on his neighbor. "And I've come to ask why you did it. In fact, I demand to know why."

"I'm disobedient, by nature," said Thaxton, slyly. "So if I had blackballed you, I'd probably refuse to obey your 'demand.' But as it happened, I didn't blackball you. I wasn't even at the Membership Committee's meeting."

"I hear, on good authority, that *you* blackballed me," insisted Osmun, his glare abating not at all.

"And I tell you, on better authority, that I didn't," returned Thaxton with a lazy calm that irked the angry man all the more.

"Then who did?" mouthed Osmun. "I've a right to know. I mean to get to the bottom of this. If a club, like the Stockbridge Hunt, blackballs a man of my standing, I'll know why. I—"

"I believe the proceedings of Membership Committee meetings are supposed to be confi-

dential," Thaxton suggested. "Why not take your medicine?"

"I still believe it was you who blackballed me!" flamed Osmun. "I had it from—"

"You have just had it from me that I didn't," interposed Thaxton, a thread of ice running through his pleasant voice. "Please let it go at that."

"You're the only man around here who would have done such a thing," urged Creede, his face reddening and his voice rising. "And I am going to find out why. We'll settle this, here and now. I—"

Thaxton rose lazily from his perch on the rail.

"If you've got to have it, then take it," he said, facing Osmun. "I wasn't at the meeting. But Willis Chase was. And I'll tell you what he told me about it, if it will ease your mind. He said, when your name was voted on, the ballot-box looked as if it were full of Concord grapes. There wasn't a single white ball dropped into the box. I'm sorry to—"

"That's a lie!" flamed Osmun.

Thaxton Vail's face lost all its habitual easy-going aspect. He took a forward step, his mus-

cles tensing. But before he could set in whizzing action the fist he had clenched, a slender little figure stepped, as though by chance, between the two men.

The interloper was a girl; wondrous graceful and dainty in her white sport suit. Her face was bronzed, beneath its crown of gold-red hair. Her brown eyes were as level and honest as a boy's.

"Aren't you almost ready, Thax?" she asked. "I've been waiting, down at the courts, ever so long while you sat up here and gossiped. Good morning, Oz. Won't you scurry around and find some one to make it 'doubles'? Thax and I always quarrel when we play 'singles.' Avert strife, won't you, by finding Greta Swalm, or some one, and joining us? Please do, Oz. We—"

Osmun Creede made a sound such as might well be expected to emanate from a turkey whose tail feathers are pulled just as it starts to gobble. Glowering afresh at Vail, but without further effort at articulate speech, he turned and stumped away.

Doris Lane watched him until his lean form was lost to view around the corner of the

veranda. Then, wheeling on Thaxton, with a striking change from her light manner, she asked:

“What was the matter? Just as I came out of the door I heard him tell you something or other was a lie. And I saw you start for him. I thought it was time to interrupt. It would be a matter for the Board of Governors, you know, here on the veranda, with every one looking on. What was the matter?”

“Oh, he thought I blackballed him, for the Hunt Club,” explained Thaxton. “When, as a matter of fact, I seem to be about the only member who didn’t. I told him so, and he said I lied. I’m—I’m mighty glad you horned in when you did. It’s always a dread of mine that some day I’ll have to thrash that chap. And you’ve saved me from doing it—this time. It’d be a hideous bore. And then there’d be good old Clive to be made blue by it, you know. And besides, Uncle Oz and his dad were—”

“I know,” she soothed. “I know. You won’t carry it any further, will you? Please don’t.”

“I suppose not,” he answered. “But, really, after a man calls another a liar and—”

“Oh, I suppose that means there’ll be one more neighborhood squabble,” she sighed, puck-

ering her low forehead in annoyance. "And two more people who won't see each other when they meet. Isn't it queer? We come out to the country for a good time. And we spend half that time starting feuds or stopping them. People can live next door to each other in a big city for a lifetime, and never squabble. Then the moment they get to the country—"

"'All Nature is strife,'" quoted Thaxton. "So I suppose when we get back to Nature we get back to strife. And speaking of strife, there was a girl who was going to let me beat her at tennis, this morning; instead of spending the day scolding me for being called a liar. Come along; before all the courts are taken. I want to forget that Oz Creede and I have got to cut each other, henceforth. Come along."

On the following morning, appeared a little "human interest" story, in the *Pittsfield Advocate*. One of those anecdotal newspaper yarns that are foredoomed to be "picked up" and copied, from one end of the continent to the other. Osmun Creede had written the story with some skill. And the editor had sent a reporter to the courthouse to verify it, before daring to print it.

The article told, in jocose fashion, of the

clause in old Osmun Vail's will, requiring his greatnephew and heir to maintain Vailholme, at request, as a hotel. An editorial note added the information that a copy of the will had been read, at the courthouse, by an *Advocate* reporter, as well as Thaxton Vail's signed acceptance of its conditions.

It was Clive Creede who first called Thaxton's notice to the newspaper yarn. While young Vail was still loitering over his morning mail, Clive rode across from Rackrent Farm, bringing a copy of the *Advocate*.

"I'm awfully sorry, old man," he lamented, as Thaxton frowningly read and reread the brief article. "Awfully sorry and ashamed. I guessed who had done this, the minute I saw it. I phoned to Oz, and charged him with doing it. He didn't deny it. Thought it was a grand joke. I explained to him that the story was dead and forgotten; and that now he had let you in for no end of ridicule and perhaps for a lot of bother, too. But he just chuckled. While I was still explaining, he hung up the receiver."

"He would," said Thaxton, curtly. "He would."

"Say, Thax," pleaded Clive, "don't be too sore on him. He means all right. He just has

an unlucky genius for doing or saying the wrong thing. It isn't his fault. He's built that way. And, honest, he's a tremendously decent chap, at heart. Please don't be riled by this newspaper squib. It can't really hurt you."

The man was very evidently stirred by the affair; and was wistfully eager, as ever, to smooth over his brother's delinquencies. Yet, annoyed by what he had just read, Thaxton did not hasten, as usual, to reassure his chum.

"You're right when you say he has 'an unlucky genius for saying the wrong thing,'" he admitted. "The last 'wrong thing' was what he said to me yesterday. He called me a liar."

"No! Oh, Lord, man, no!"

"Before I could slug him or remember he was your brother, Doris Lane strolled in between us, and the war was off. You might warn him not to say that particular 'wrong thing' to me again, if you like. Because, next time, Doris might not be nearby enough to stave off the results. And I'd hate, like blazes, to punch a brother of yours. Especially when he's just getting on his feet after a sickness. But—"

"I wish you'd punch *me*, instead!" declared Clive. "Gods, but I'm ashamed! I'll give him the deuce for this. Won't you—is there any use

asking you to overlook it—to accept my own apology for it—and not to let it break off your acquaintance with Oz? It'd make a mighty hit with me, Thax," he ended, unhappily. "I think a lot of him. He—"

Thaxton laughed, ruefully.

"That's the way it's always been," he grumbled. "Whenever Oz does or says some unspeakably rotten thing, and just as he's about to get in trouble for it, you always hop in and deflect the lightning. You've been doing it ever since you were a kid. There, stop looking as if some one was going to cut off your breathing supply! It's all right. I'll forget the whole thing—so far as my actions towards Oz are concerned. Only, warn him not to do anything to make me remember it again. As for this mess he's stirred up, in the *Advocate*, I can't see what special effect it'll have. Uncle Oz was too well loved, hereabouts, for it to make his memory ridiculous."

But, within the day, Thaxton learned of at least one "special effect" the news item was to have. At four o'clock that afternoon, he received a state visit from a little old lady whom he loved much for herself and more for her

niece. The visitor was Miss Hester Gregg, Doris's aunt and adoptive mother.

"Please say you're glad to see me, Thax," she greeted Vail. "And please say it, *now*. Because when you hear what I've come for, you'll hate me. Not that I mind being hated, you know," she added. "But you lack the brain to hate, intelligently. You'd make a botch of it. And I like you too well to see you bungle. Now shall I tell you what I've come for?"

"If you don't," he replied, solemnly, "I shall begin hating you for getting my curiosity all worked up, like this. Blaze away."

"In the first place," she began, "you know all about our agonies, with the decorators, at Stormcrest. You've barked your shins over their miserable pails and paper-rolls, every time you've tried to lure Doris into a dark corner of our veranda. Well, I figured we could stay on, while they were plying their accursèd trade. I thought we could retreat before them, from room to room; and at last slip around them and take up our abode in the rooms they had finished, while they were working on the final ones. It was a pretty thought. But we can't. We found that out, to-day. We're like old Baldy Tod, up at Montgomery. He set out to paint

his kitchen floor, and he painted himself into a corner. We're decorated into a corner. We've got to get out, Doris and I, for at least a week; while they finish the house. We've nowhere to live. Be it never so jumbled there's no place at home—"

"But—"

"We drove over to Stockbridge, to-day, to see if we could get rooms in either of the hotels. (We'll have to be near here; so I can oversee the miserable activities of the decorators, every day.) No use. Both hotels disgustingly full of tourists. The return of all you A. E. F. men and the post-war rush of cash-to-the-pocket-book have jammed every summer resort on earth. We tried at Lenox and Lee and we even went over to Pittsfield. The same everywhere. Not an inn or a hotel with a room vacant. Then—"

"Hooray!" exulted Vail. "Stop right there! I have the solution. You and Doris come over here! I've loads of room. And it'll be ever so jolly to have you—both. *Please* come!"

"My dear boy," said the old lady, "that's just what I've been leading up to for five minutes."

"Gorgeous! But when are you going to get to the part of your visit that's due to make me

hate you? Thus far, you've been as welcome as double dividends on a non-taxable stock. When does the 'hate' part begin?"

"It's begun," she said. "Now let me finish it. I saw the *Advocate* story, this morning. I'd almost forgotten that funny part of the will. But it gave me my idea. I spoke of it to Doris. She was horrified. And that confirmed my resolve. Whenever modern young people are horrified at a thing, one may know that is the only wise and right thing to do."

"I don't understand," he said, crestfallen. "Doesn't she want to come here? I hoped—"

"Not the way *I'm* coming," supplemented Miss Gregg. "I'm not coming to visit Vailholme as a guest. I'm coming here to board!"

She paused to let him get the full effect of her words. He got them. And he registered his understanding by a snort of disdain.

"Your great-uncle," she resumed, defiantly, "put that clause in his will for the benefit of wayfarers up here who could pay and who couldn't get any other accommodations. That fits my case precisely. So it'll be great fun. Besides, I loathe visiting. And I really enjoy boarding. So I am coming here, for a week, with Doris. To board. Not as a guest. *To*

board. So *that's* settled. We will be here about eleven o'clock, to-morrow morning."

She gazed in placid triumph at the bewildered young man.

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" he sputtered. "You're the oldest friends I've got—both of you are. And it'll be *great* to have you stay here from now till the Tuesday after Eternity. But you're not going to board. That's plain idiocy."

"Thax," she rebuked. "You are talking loudly and foolishly. We are coming to board with you. It's all settled. I settled it, myself. So I know. We're coming for a week. And our time will be our own, and we won't feel under any civil obligations or have to be a bit nicer than we want to. It's an ideal arrangement. And if the coffee is no better than it was, the last night we dined here, I warn you I shall speak very vehemently to you about it. Coffee making is as much an art as violin playing or administering a snub. It is not just a kitchen chore. We shall stay here," she forestalled his gurgling protest, "under an act of Legislature of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The law demands that a landlord give us hotel accommo-

dations, until such time as we prove to be pests or forget to pay our bills. We—”

“Bills!” stammered Thaxton. “Oh, murder!”

“That brings me to the question of terms,” she resumed. “There will be Doris and myself and Clarice, my personal maid. (Clarice has the manners of a bolshevist and the morals of a medical student. But she has become a habit with me.) We shall want a suite of two bedrooms and a sitting room and bath for Doris and myself. And we shall need some sort of room for Clarice. A cage will do, for her, at a pinch. I’ve been figuring what you ought to charge me; and I’ve decided that a fair price would be—”

“So have I,” interrupted Thaxton, a glint of hope brightening his embarrassment. “I’ve been figuring on it, too. On the price, I mean. Man and boy, I’ve been thinking it over, for the best part of ten seconds. I am the landlord. And as such I have all sorts of rights, by law; including the right to fix prices. Likewise, I’m going to fix it. If you don’t like my rates, you can’t come here. That’s legal. Well, my dear Miss Gregg, on mature thought, I have decided to make special rates for you and your niece

and Clarice. I shall let you have the suite you speak of, per week, with meals (and coffee, such as it is) for the sum of fifteen cents per day—five cents for each of you—or at the cut rate of one dollar weekly. Payable in advance. Those are my terms. Take them or leave them.”

He beamed maliciously upon the old lady. To his surprise, she made instant and meek answer:

“The terms are satisfactory. We’ll take the rooms for one week, with privilege of renewal. I don’t happen to have a dollar, in change, with me, at the moment. Will you accept a written order for one dollar; in payment of a week’s board in advance?”

“As I know you so well,” he responded, deliberating, “I think I may go so far as to do that. Of course, you realize, though, that if the order is not honored at the bank, I must request either cash payment or the return of your keys. That is our invariable rule. And now, may I trouble you for that order?”

From her case Miss Gregg drew a visiting card and a chewed gold pencil. She scribbled, for a minute, on the card-back; then signed what she had written; and handed the card to Thaxton. He glanced amusedly at it; then his

face went idiotically blank. Once more, his lips working, he read the lines scribbled on the back of the card:

“Curator of Numismatic Dept., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City:—Please deliver to bearer (Mr. Thaxton Vail) upon proper identification, the silver dollar, dated 1804, which I placed on exhibition at the Museum.—Hester Gregg.”

“The 1804 dollar!” he gasped. “That’s a low-down trick to play on me!”

“Why?” she asked, innocently. “It is worth at least its face value. In fact—as you may recall—my father paid \$2,700 for it. When I placed it on view at the Museum, the curator told me its present value is nearer \$3,600. You see, there are only three of them, extant. So, since you really insist on \$1 a week for our board, it may as well be paid with a dollar that is worth the—”

“I surrender!” groaned Thaxton.

“You’d have saved so much trouble—people *always* would save themselves so much trouble,” she sighed, plaintively, “by just letting me have my own way in the first place. Thaxton, I am going to pay you \$200 a week, board. As summer hotel rates go, now, it is a moderate price

for what we're going to get. And I'll see we get it. We'll be here, luggage and all, at about eleven in the morning. And now suppose you ring for Horoson. I want to talk to her about all sorts of arrangements. You'd never understand. And you'd only be in the way, while we're talking. So, run out to the car. I left Doris there. Run along."

Summoning his housekeeper,—who had also kept house for Osmun Vail,—Thaxton departed bewilderedly to the car where Doris was awaiting her aunt's return.

"Are you going to let us come here, Thax?" hailed the girl, eagerly. "I do hope so! I wanted, ever so much, to go in while Auntie was making her beautifully preposterous request. But she said I mustn't. She said there might be a terrible scene; and that you might use language. She said she is too innocent to understand the lurid things you might say, if you lost your temper; but that I'm more sophisticated; and that it'd be bad for me. *Was* there a 'terrible scene;' Thax?"

"Don't call me 'Thax!' " he admonished, icily. "It isn't good form to shower familiar nicknames on your hotelkeeper. It gives him a notion he can be familiar or else that *you're* trying

to be familiar. It's bad, either way. Call me 'Mine Host.' And in moments of reproof, call me 'Fellow.' If only I can acquire a bald head and a red nose and a bay window (and a white apron to drape over it) I'll be able to play the sorry rôle with no more discomfort than if I were having my backteeth pulled. In the meantime, I'm as sore as a mashed thumb. What on earth possessed her to do such a thing?"

"Why, she looks on it as a stroke of genius!" said Doris. "Any one can go visiting. But no one ever went boarding in this way, before. It's just like Auntie. She's ever so wonderful. She isn't a bit like any one else. Aren't you going to be at all glad to have us here?"

CHAPTER III

AN INVOLUNTARY LANDLORD

THAXTON VAIL was eating a solitary breakfast, next morning, when, wholly unannounced, a long and ecstatic youth burst in upon him. The intruder was Willis Chase, who had roomed with Thaxton at Williams and who still was his fairly close and most annoyingly irresponsible friend.

“Grand!” yelled Chase, bearing down upon the breakfaster. “Grand and colossal! A taxi-bandit is dumping all my luggage on the veranda, and your poor sour-visaged butler is making awful sounds at him. I didn’t bring my man. I didn’t even bring my own car. I taxied over from the club, just as I was; the moment I read it. I knew you had plenty of cars here; and the hotel valet can look after me. I’m inured to roughing it. Isn’t it a spree?”

“If you’ll stop running around the ceiling, and light somewhere, and speak the language of the country,” suggested the puzzled Thaxton, “perhaps I can make some guess what this is all

about. I take it you're inviting yourself here for a visit. But what you mean by 'the hotel valet' is more than I—"

"Don't you grasp it?" demanded Chase, in amaze. "Haven't you even read that thing? It was in one of the New York papers, at the club, this morning. A chap, there, said it was in the *Advocate*, yesterday. Your secret has exploded. All the cruel world knows of your shame. You run a hotel. You have to; or else you'd lose Vailholme. It's all in the paper. In nice clear print. For everybody to read. And everybody's reading it, ever so happily. I'm going to be your first guest. It all flashed on me, like—"

"Then switch the flash off!" ordered Thaxton, impatiently. "This crazy thing seems to hit you as a grand joke. To me, it hasn't a single redeeming feature. Clear out!"

"My worthy fellow," reproved Chase, "you forget yourself. You run a hotel. Your hotel is not full. I demand a room here. I can pay. By law, you cannot refuse to take me in. If you do, I shall bring an attorney here to enforce my rights. And at the same time, I shall bring along ten or eleven or nineteen of the Hunt Club crowd, as fellow-guests; to liven things for the

rest of the summer. Now, Landlord, do I stay; or do I not?"

Vail glowered on his ecstatically grinning friend, in sour abhorrence. Then he growled:

"If I throw you out, it'd be just like you to bring along that howling crowd of outcasts; and all of you would camp here on me for the season. If you think it's a joke, keep the joke to yourself. If you insist on butting in here, you can stay. Not because I want you. I don't. But you're equal to making things fifty times worse, if I turn you out.

"I sure am," assented Chase, much pleased by the compliment to his powers. "Maybe even seventy-eight times worse. And then some—*et puis quelque*, as we ten-lesson boulevardiers say. So here we are. Now, what can you do for me in the way of rooms, me good man? The best is none too good. I am accustomed to rare luxury in my own palatial home, and I expect magnificent accommodations here."

Thaxton's grim mouth relaxed.

"Very good," he agreed. "Miss Gregg and Doris are due here, too, in an hour or so. They have picked out my best suite. But—"

"They are? Glory be! I—"

Thaxton proceeded:

“As landlord, I have the right to put my guests in any sort of room I choose to; and to charge them what price I choose. If my guests don’t like that, they can get out. I have all manner of rooms, you know; from my own to the magenta. Do you remember the magenta room, by any chance?”

“Do I?” snorted Chase, memory of acute misery making him drop momentarily his pose. “*Do* I? Didn’t I get that room wished on me, six years ago, when your uncle had the Christmas house party; and when I turned up at the last minute? I remember how the dear old chap apologized for sticking me in there. Every other inch of space was crowded. I swear I believe that terrible room is the only uncomfortable spot in this house of yours, Thax. I wonder you don’t have it turned into a store-room or something. Right over the kitchen; hot as Hades and too small to swing a cat in, and no decent ventilation. Why do you ask if I ‘remember’ it? Joan of Arc would be as likely to forget the stake. If you’re leading up to telling me the room’s been walled in or—”

“I’m not,” said Vail. “I’m leading up to telling you that that’s the room I’m assigning to you. And the price, with board, will be one

hundred dollars a day. Take it or leave it. As—”

A howl from Chase interrupted him.

“Take it or leave it,” placidly repeated Vail. “In reverse to the order named.”

“You miserable Shylock!” stormed Chase. “And after I worked it all out so beautifully! Say, listen! Just to spite you and to take that smug look off your ugly face, I’m going to stay! Get that? I’m going to *stay!* One day, anyhow. And I’ll take that hundred dollars out of your hide, somehow or other, while I’m here! Watch if I don’t. It— What you got there?” he broke off.

Thaxton had pulled out an after-breakfast cigar and had felt in vain for the cigar-cutter which usually lodged in his cash pocket. Failing to find it, he had fished forth a knife to cut the cigar-end. It was the sight of this knife which had caught the mercurial Chase’s interest. Thaxton handed it across the table for his friend’s inspection.

“It’s a German officer’s army knife,” he explained. “Clive Creede brought it home with him, from overseas, for me. There aren’t any more of them made. It weighs a quarter-pound

or so, but it has every tool and appliance on earth tucked away, among its big blades. It's the greatest sort of knife in the world for an outdoor man to carry, in the country."

Chase, with the curiosity of a monkey, was prying open blade after blade, then tool after tool, examining each in childlike admiration.

"What's this for?" he asked, presently, after closing a pair of folding scissors and a sailor's needle; and laboriously picking open a long triangular-edged instrument at the back of the knife. "This blade, or whatever it is. It's got a point like a needle. But it slopes back to a thick base. And its three edges are razor-sharp. What do you use it for?"

"I don't use it for anything," replied Vail. "I don't know just what it's for. It's some sort of punch, I suppose. To make graduated holes in girths or in puttee-straps or belts. Vicious looking blade, isn't it? The knife's a treasure, though. It—"

"Say! About that magenta room, now! Blast you, can't I—?"

"Take it or get out! I hope you'll get out. It—"

A shadow, athwart the nearest long window,

made them turn around. Clive Creede was stepping across the sill, into the room. He was pale and hollow-eyed; and seemed very sick.

“Hello, old man!” Vail greeted him. “You came in, like a ghost. And you look like one, too. Was it a large night or—?”

“It was,” answered Clive, hoarsely, as he turned from shaking hands with his host and with Chase. “A very large night. In fact it came close to being a size too large for me. I got to fooling with some new monoxide gas experiments in that laboratory of Oz’s and mine. No use going into details that’d bore you. But I struck a combination by accident that put me out.”

“You look it. Why—?”

“Oz happened to drop in. He found me on the lab floor; just about gone for good. He lugged me out of doors and worked over me for a couple of hours before he got me on my feet. The whole house,—the whole of Rackrent Farm, it seems to me,—smells of the rotten chemical stuff. I got out, this morning, before it could keel me over again. The smell will hang around there for days, I suppose. It—”

“Why in blazes should a grown man waste time puttering around with silly messes of

chemicals?" orated Chase, to the world at large. "At best, he can only discover a new combination of smelly drugs. And at worst, he can be croaked by them. Not that research isn't a grand thing, in its way," he added. "I used to do a bit of it, myself. For instance, last month, I discovered one miraculously fine combination, I remember: A hooker of any of the Seven Deadly Gins, and one— No, that's wrong! Two parts Jersey applejack to one part French—"

He broke off in his bibulous reminiscences, finding he was not listened to. Thaxton solicitously had helped Clive to a chair and was pouring him a cup of black coffee. The visitor appeared to be on the verge of serious collapse.

"Did Doc Lawton think it was all right for you to leave the house while you're so done up?" asked Vail.

"I didn't send for him. Oz pulled me through," returned Clive, dully. "Then I piked over here. I couldn't stay there, in that horribly smelly place, could I?"

He shuddered, in reminiscence, and gulped his coffee.

"It'll be days before the place is fit to live in again," he said. "The gases have permeated—"

“I’d swap the magenta room for it, any time,” put in Chase, unheeded.

Clive continued:

“Oz brought me as far as your door, in his runabout. He had an idea he wouldn’t be over-welcome here, so he went on. He wanted me to stay at Canobie, with him, till I can go back home. But— Well, when I’m as knocked out as this, I don’t want to. Oz is all right. He’s a dandy brother, and a white pal. But he has no way with the sick. He—”

“I know,” said Thaxton, as Clive halted, embarrassed. “I know.”

“You see,” added Clive, “I don’t want you to think I’m a baby, to go to pieces like this. But the fumes seem to have caught me where I was gassed, at Montfaucon. Started up all the old pain and gasping and faintness, and heart bother and splitting headache again. I’ve heard it comes back, like that. The surgeon told me it might. And now I know it does. It’s put me pretty well onto the discard. But a few days quiet will set me on my feet.”

“So you rolled over here, first crack out of the box?” suggested Willis Chase. “By way of keeping perfectly quiet?”

“No,” denied Clive, looking up, apologetically,

from his second cup of black coffee. "I came over to sponge on Thax, if he'll let me. Thax, will it bother you a whole lot if I stay here with you for a few days? I won't be in the way. And I know you've got lots of room, and nobody else is stopping with you. I don't want to put it on the 'hotel' basis. But that's what gave me the nerve to ask—"

"Rot!" exclaimed Thaxton, in forced cordiality. "What's the use of all that preamble? You're knocked off your feet. You can't stay at home. Every inn is full, for ten miles around. I can understand your not wanting to stay with Oz. If you hadn't come here, I'd have come after you. Of course, you must stay."

As a matter of fact, all Vail's boyhood friendship for the invalid was called upon, to make the invitation sound spontaneous. He liked Clive. He liked him better than any other friend. Ordinarily, it would have been a joy to have him for a house-guest. The two men had always been congenial, even though they had seen less of each other since their return from France and had abated some of the oldtime boyish chumship.

Yet with Doris Lane coming to Vailholme, the host had dreamed of long uninterrupted

hours with her. And now the presence of this other admirer of hers would block most of his golden plans. Yet there was no way out of it. In any event Willis Chase's undesired arrival had wrecked his hopes for sweet seclusion. So the man made the best of the annoying situation and threw into his voice and manner the cordiality he could not put into his heart.

He was ashamed of himself for his sub-resentment that this sick comrade of his should find no warmer welcome, in appealing to him for hospitality. Yet the dream of having Doris all to himself for hours a day had been so joyous! While he could not rebuff Clive as he had sought to rebuff Willis Chase, yet he could not be glad the invalid had chosen this particular time to descend upon Vailholme.

Sending for Mrs. Horoson, his elderly housekeeper, he bade her prepare the two east rooms for Clive's reception.

"Say!" Chase broke in on the instructions. "You told me that measly magenta room was the only one you had vacant!"

"I did not," rasped Thaxton. "I told you it was the only one *you* could have. And it is. I hope you won't take it. If I'd had any sense

I'd have said the furnace room was the only one I'd give you. That or the coal cellar."

"Never mind!" sighed Chase, with true Christian resignation. "What am *I*, to complain? What am *I*?"

"I'd hate to tell you," snapped Thaxton.

"What are you charging Clive?" demanded Willis.

"A penny a year. Laundry three cents extra. He—"

"Miss Gregg, sir. Miss Lane," announced the sour-visaged butler, from the dining room doorway.

Thaxton arose wearily and went to meet his guests. All night he had mused happily on the rare chance which was to make Doris and himself housemates for an entire rapturous week—a week, presumably, in which Miss Gregg should busy herself on long daily inspection visits to Stormcrest. And now—an invalid and a cheery pest were to shatter that lovely solitude.

CHAPTER IV

TWO OR THREE INTRUDERS

YET luncheon was a gay enough meal. All the guests were old friends, and all were more or less congenial. Thaxton's duties as host were in no way onerous, except when Willis Chase undertook to guy him as to his anomalous position as hotelkeeper—which Chase proceeded to do at intervals varying from two minutes to fifteen.

In the afternoon, Miss Gregg was forced to drive across to Stormcrest, to superintend the first touches of the decorators to her remaining rooms. Clive made some excuse for retiring shakily to his own rooms for a rest. Willis Chase had to go back to Stockbridge on urgent business—having found, on unpacking, that in his haste he had brought along all his evening clothes except the trousers.

Thus, for an hour or so, Vail had Doris Lane to himself. They idled about the grounds, Vail showing the girl his new sunken garden and his trout hatcheries. Throughout the dawdling

tour they talked idly and blissfully, and withal a whit shyly, as do lovers on whom the Great Moment is making ready to dawn. At their heels paced Vail's dark sable collie, Macduff.

The sky was hazy, the air was hot. Weather-wise Berkshire folk would have prophesied a torrid spell, the more unbearable for the bracing cool of the region's normal air. But the hot wave had merely sent this mildly tepid day as a herald.

To the lounging young folk in the garden it carried no message. Yet at whiles they fell silent as they drifted aimlessly about the grounds. There was a witchery that both found hard to ignore.

Rousing herself embarrassedly from one of these sweet silences, Doris nodded toward the big brown collie, who had come to a standstill in front of a puffy and warty old toad, fly-catching at the edge of a rock shelf.

The dog, strolling along in bored majesty in front of his human escorts, had caught the acrid scent of the toad and was crouching truculently in front of it, making little slapping gestures at the phlegmatic creature with his white forepaws and then bounding back, as if he feared it might turn and rend him.

It was quite evident that Macduff regarded his encounter with that somnolent toad as one of the High Dramatic Moments of his career. Defiantly, yet with elaborate caution, he proceeded to harry it from a safe distance.

“What on earth makes him so silly?” asked Doris as she and Vail paused to watch the scene—the dog’s furry and fast-moving body taking up the entire narrow width of the path. “He must have seen a million toads, in his time.”

“What on earth made you cry, the evening we saw Bernhardt die, in *Camille*, when we were kids?” he countered, banteringly. “You knew she wasn’t really dead. You knew she’d get into her street clothes and scrub the ghastliness off her face and go out somewhere and eat a big supper. But you wept, very happily. And I had to give you my spare handkerchief. And it had a hole in it, I remember. I was hideously mortified. Every time I went to the theater with you, after that, I carried a stock of brand-new two-dollar handkerchiefs, to impress you. But you never cried, again, at a play. So that’s all the good they did me. Of course, the one time you cried, I had to be there with the last torn handkerchief I ever carried. Remember?”

“I remember I asked you why Mac is so silly

about that toad," she reproved him, "and you mask your ignorance of natural history and of dog-psychology by changing the subject."

"I did not!" he denied, with much fervor. "I was leading up in a persuasive yet scholarly way to my explanation. You knew Bernhardt wasn't dying. Yet you cried. Mac knows that toad is as harmless as they make them. Yet he is fighting a spectacular duel with it. You entered into the spirit of a play. He's entering into the spirit of a perilous jungle adventure. You cried because an elderly Frenchwoman draped herself on a sofa and played dead. He is all het up, because he's endowing that toad with a blend of the qualities of a bear and a charging rhinoceros. That's the collie of it. Collies are forever inventing and playing thrillingly dramatic games. Just as you and I are always eager to see thrillingly dramatic plays. It isn't really silly. Or if it is, then what are people who pay to get thrills out of plays they know aren't true and out of novels that they know are lies? On the level, I think Mac has a bit the best of us."

"Why doesn't he bring the sterling drama to a climax by annihilating the toad so we can get past?" she demanded, adding, "Not that I'd let him. That's why I'm waiting here,

while he blocks the path, instead of going around him.”

“If that’s all you’re waiting for,” he reassured her, “your long wait has been for nothing. No rescue will be needed. Mac will never touch the toad.”

“Does Mac know he won’t, though?”

“He does,” returned Vail, with finality. “Every normal outdoors dog, in early puppyhood, undertakes to bite or pick up a toad. And no dog ever tried it a second time. A zoölogy sharp told me why. He said toads’ skins are covered with some sort of chemical that would make alum taste like sugar, by contrast. It’s horrible stuff, and it’s the toad’s only weapon. No dog ever takes a second chance of torturing his tongue with it. That’s why Mac keeps his mouth shut, every time he noses at the ugly thing. The toad is quite as safe from him as Bernhardt was from dying on the elaborate *Camille* sofa. Mac knows it. And the toad knows it. If toads know anything. So nobody’s the worse for the drama. . . . One side there, Mac! You’re a pest.”

At the command, the collie gave over his harrowing assault, and wandered unconcernedly down the path ahead of them, his plumed tail

gently waving, his tulip ears alert for some new adventure.

“Remember old Chubb Beasley?” asked Thaxton. “He lived down on the Lee Road.”

“I do, indeed,” she made answer. “He used to be pointed out to us by our Sunday School teacher as the one best local example of the awful effects of drink. What about him?”

“He owned Macduff’s sire,” said Vail. “A great big gold-and-white collie—a beauty. Chubb used to go down to Lee, regularly, every Saturday, to spend his pay at the speak-easy booze joint in the back of Clow’s grocery. The old chap used to say: ‘If I c’d afford it, I’d have a batting average of seven night a week. As it is, I gotta do my ’umble best of a Sat’dy night.’ And he did it. He came home late every Saturday evening, in a condition where the width of the road bothered him more than the length of it. And always, his loyal old collie was waiting at the gate to welcome him and guide his tangled footsteps up the walk to the house.”

“Good old collie!” she applauded. “But—”

“One night, Beasley got to Clow’s just as the saloon was raided by the Civic Reform Committee. He couldn’t get a drink, and he spent

the evening wandering around looking for one. He had to go back home, for the first Saturday night in years, dead cold sober. The collie was waiting for him at the gate, as usual. Chubb strode up to him on steady unwavering legs and without either singing or crying. He didn't even walk with an accent. The faithful dog sprang at the poor old cuss and bit him. Didn't know his own master."

Macduff's histrionic display, and the story it had evoked, dispersed the sweet spell that had hung over the man and the maid, throughout their leisurely walk. Subconsciously, both felt and resented the glamour's vanishing, without being able to realize their own emotions or to guess why the ramble had somehow lost its dreamy charm.

They were at the well-defined stage of heart malady when a trifle will cloud the elusive sun, and when a shattered mood cannot be reconstructed at will.

Doris became vaguely aware that the afternoon was hot and that her nose was probably shiny. Instinctively, she turned toward the house.

Vail, unable to frame an excuse for prolonging the stroll, fell into step at her side, obsessed

by a dull feeling that the walk had somehow been a failure and that he was making no progress at all in his suit.

As they made their way houseward across the rolling expanse of side-lawn, they saw a huge and dusty car drawn up under the porte-cochère. On the steps was a heap of luggage. A chauffeur stood by the car, stretching his putteed legs, and smoking a furtive cigarette; the machine's bulk between him and the porch.

In the tonneau lolled a fat and asthmatic-looking old German police dog.

On the veranda, in two wicker chairs drawn forward from their wonted places, lolled a man and a woman swathed in yellow dust-coats. The man was enormous, paunchy, pendulous, sleek. The woman was small and dark and acerb. They were chatting airily, as Vail and Doris drew near.

In front of them wavered Vogel, the butler, trying to get in a word edgewise, as they talked. Back of the doorway, in the hall, could be seen the shadowy forms of the second man and a capped maid, listening avidly.

At sight of Thaxton, the butler abandoned his vain effort to interrupt the strangers and came

in ponderous haste down the stone steps and across the lawn to meet his employer.

“Excuse me, sir,” began Vogel, worriedly, “but might I speak to you a minute?”

Doris, with a word of dismissal to her escort, moved on toward the house, entering by a French window and giving the queerly occupied front veranda a wide berth.

“Well?” impatiently asked Vail, vexed at the interruption and by the presence of the unrecognized couple on the porch. “Well, Vogel? What is it? And who are those people?”

For reply, the butler proffered him two cards. He presented them, on their tray, as if afraid they might turn and rend him.

“They are persons, sir,” he said, loftily. “Just persons, sir. Not people.”

Without listening to the distinction, Thaxton Vail was scanning the cards. He read, half aloud:

“*Mr. Joshua Q. Mosely.*” Then, “*Mrs. Joshua Q. Mosely, 222 River Front Terrace, . . . Tuesdays until Lent.*”

“Interesting, if true. I should say, offhand, it ought to count them about three, decimal five,” gravely commented Vail. “But it’s nothing in *my* young life. I don’t know them.”

“No, sir,” agreed Vogel. “You would not be likely to, sir. Nobody would. They are persons. Most peculiar persons, too. I think they are a bit jiggled, sir, if I might say so. Unbalanced. Why, sir, they actually thought this was an hotel!”

“Huh?” interjected Vail, with much the same sound as might have been expected from him had some one dug an elbow violently into his stomach. “Huh? What’s that, Vogel? Hotel?”

“Yes, sir. That’s why I took the liberty of asking to speak to you alone. I fancied you would not wish Miss Lane to hear of such a ridiculous—”

“What do you mean?”

“Why, sir, they came here, some five minutes ago, and ordered Francis to conduct them to ‘the desk.’ He could not understand, sir, so he came to me, and I went out to see what it meant. They told me they wished rooms here; for themselves and for their chauffeur. And for that stout gray dog in the car. They were most unnecessarily unpleasant, sir, when I told them this was no hotel. They insist it is. They say they know all about it. And they demand to see the proprietor. I was arguing with them when I saw you coming. Would it be well, sir, if I

should telephone the police station at Aura or—?”

“No,” groaned Vail. “I’ll see them. You needn’t wait.”

Bracing himself, and cursing his loved great-uncle’s eccentricity, and cursing a thousand times more vehemently the mischief-act of Os-mun Creede, the unhappy householder walked up the veranda steps and confronted the two newcomers.

On the way he planned to carry off the situation with a high hand and to get rid of the couple as quickly as might be. Whistling to heel Macduff, the collie, who showed strong and hostile signs of seeking closer acquaintance with the fat police dog, he advanced on the couple.

“Good afternoon,” he said, briskly, as he bore down on the big man and the small woman. “I am Thaxton Vail. What can I do for you?”

“I am Joshua Q. Mosely,” answered the enormous man, making no move to rise from the easy chair from whose ample sides his fat bulk was billowing sloppily. “What are your rates?”

“Rates?” echoed Vail, dully.

“Yes,” replied Mosely. “Your rates—American plan—for an outside room and board for

Mrs. M. and myself and a shakedown, somewhere, for Pee-air. . . . Pee-air is our chauffeur. How much?"

"Please explain," said Vail, bluffing weakly.

"Yep," nodded Joshua Q. Mosely. "He said you'd try to stall. Said you were queer that way. But he said if I stuck to it, I'd get in. Said he could prove you weren't full up. So I'm sticking to it. How much for—?"

"Who are you talking about?" queried Vail. "Who's 'he'? And—"

"Here's his card," responded Joshua Q. Mosely, groping in an inner pocket. "Met him on the steps of the Red Lion—at Stockbridge, you know—this morning. They'd told us they hadn't a room left there. Same thing at Haddon Hall. Same thing at Pittsfield. Same thing at Lenox. Same at Lee. Full everywhere. Gee, but you Berkshire hotel men must be making a big turnover, this season! Yep, here's his card. Thought I'd lost it."

He fished out a slightly crumpled oblong of stiff paper and handed it to Vail. Thaxton read: "*Mr. Osmun Creede, 'Canobie,' Aura, Massachusetts.*"

"We were coming out of the Red Lion," resumed Joshua Q. Mosely. "Figured we'd have

to drive all the way to Greenfield or maybe to Springfield, before we could get rooms. We didn't want to do that. We wanted another day in this region and then make the thirty-mile run to Williamstown and back to North Adams and over the Mohawk Trail to—”

“Quite so,” cut in Vail. “What has all this to do with—?”

“I was coming to that. We were standing there on the steps, jawing about it, the wife and me, when up comes this Mr. Creede. He'd been sitting on the porch there and he'd overheard us. He hands me his card and he says: ‘You can get into Vailholme if you're a mind to,’ he says. ‘Most excloosive hotel in the Berkshires. Not like any other place in America. Best food. Best rooms. They never advertise. So they aren't full up,’ he says. ‘They try to keep folks away. But give Mr. Vail this card and tell him I'll know who to go to with information if he refuses to take in people who can't get accommodations elsewhere; and he'll take you in.’ I thought maybe he was jollyng me.”

“I—”

“He looked kind of funny while he talked to me,” prattled Mosely, unheeding. “So I asked the day clerk at the Red Lion about it.

The clerk said he knew you run a hotel, because he'd read about it in the paper. And he guessed you weren't full up. So here I came. And your—your head waiter, I s'pose he is, he told me you didn't have but four folks stopping here with you just now. So that means you've got rooms left. What rates for—”

A despairing grunt from Vail checked at last the flow of monologue. Thaxton was aware of a deep yearning to hunt up Osmun Creede and murder him. Well did he understand the inner meaning of Creede's hint as to the lodging of information in case Vail should refuse to obey the terms of the will whereby he held tenure of Vailholme. And he knew Osmun was quite capable of keeping his word.

Vailholme was dear to Thaxton. He was not minded to lose it through any legal loophole. He was profoundly ignorant of the law. But he remembered signing an agreement to fulfill all the conditions of his greatuncle's will before assuming ownership of the property.

“I am obliged,” he said, haltingly, “to take in any travelers who can pay my prices. Probably that is what Mr. Creede meant. But I have no adequate provision—or provisions—for guests. I don't think you'd care for it, here; even for a

single day. Why not go on to North Adams, to the—”

“No, thanks, friend,” disclaimed Joshua Q. Mosely, with a leer of infinite cunning. “This isn’t the first time the wife and I have been steered away from exclusive joints. We know the signs. And we want to stop here. So here we stop. For the night, anyhow. We know our rights. And we know the law. Now, once more, what’s your rates for us? Put a price on the—”

“Your chauffeur will have to bunk in at one of the rooms over the garage,” said Vail, morbidly aware that the butler and a maid and the second man were still listening from the hallway. “And I can’t give you and Mrs. Mosely a room with a bath. I’ll have to give you one without. And you’ll have to eat at the only table I have—the table where I and my four personal guests will dine.”

“That’s all right,” pleasantly agreed the tourist. “We’re democratic, Mrs. M. and me. We’ll put up with the best we can get. How much?”

“For all three of you,” said Thaxton, “the lump price will be—let’s see—the lump price will be two hundred dollars a day.”

Joshua Q. Mosely gobbled. His lean little wife arose and faced him.

“It’s just like all these other exclusive places, Josh!” she shrilled. “He’s trying to lose us. Don’t you let him! We’ll stay. It’ll be worth two hundred dollars just to spite the stuck-up chap. We’ll stay, young man. Get that? We’ll *stay*. If you knew anything about Golden City, you’d know two hundred dollars is no more to my husband than a plugged nickel would be worth to one of you Massachusetts snobs. We’re ‘doing’ the Berkshires. And we’re prepared to be done while we’re doing it. We can afford to. Have us shown up to that room.”

Lugubriously Vail stepped to the hall door.

“Vogel,” he said, as a vanishing swarm of servants greeted his advent, “show these people up to the violet room. Have Francis help their chauffeur up with the luggage. Then have Gavroche take the chauffeur to one of the garage rooms.”

He spoke with much authority; and forcibly withal. But he dared not meet the fishy eye of his butler. And he retreated to the veranda again, as soon as he had delivered the order.

“It’s all up,” he announced to Willis Chase, three minutes later, as this first of his unwelcome guests alighted from a Stockbridge taxi, bearing a bagful of the forgotten sections of his apparel.

“Here’s where I decamp. If I can’t get some inn to put me up for the night, I’ll take a train for New York.”

“And leave us to our fate?” queried Chase, disgustedly.

“Precisely that. And I hope it’ll be a miserable fate. What do you suppose has happened?”

Briefly, bitterly, he told of the arrival of the Moselys. Willis Chase smiled in pure rapture. Then his face fell as he asked concernedly:

“And you say you’re getting out and deserting us?”

“Why not? It’ll be horrible. Fancy those two unspeakable vulgarians sitting down to dinner with one! Fancy having to meet Vogel’s righteous wrath! Fancy—”

“Fancy walking out on us!” retorted Chase. “Fancy leaving a girl like Doris Lane to the mercies of the Moselys’ society at dinner! Fancy what she’ll think of you for deserting her and her aunt, like a quitter, when your place is at the head of your own table! Fancy leaving a disorganized household that’ll probably go on strike! We’ve paid our board. Are you going to welsh on us? Poor old Clive Creede is sick

and all shot to pieces. He came here to you for refuge. Going to leave him to—?”

“No,” groaned Thaxton. “I suppose not. You’re right. I can’t. I’ve got to stay and see it out. If I valued Vailholme any less than I value my right arm, though, I’d let Uncle Oz’s fool conditions go to blazes. Say! Let’s go for a walk. It’s hot as Tophet and I’m tired. But it’ll be better than meeting Vogel till I have to. Let me put that off as long as I can. Something tells me he is going to be nasty. And that means he’ll probably organize a strike. Come along, Macduff!” he bade the collie. “Stop nosing at that obese German dog in the car and come here!”

“Why can’t real life butlers be like the dear old stage butlers?” sighed Chase, sympathetically, as he and Vail slunk, with guilty haste, down the veranda steps and across the lawn. “Now if only Vogel were on the stage, he’d come to you, with an antique ruffled shirt and with his knees wabbling, and he’d say: ‘Master, I’ve saved up a little out of my wages, this past ninety years that I’ve served your house. I know you’re in trouble. Here’s my savings, Master! Maybe they’ll help. And I’ll keep on

working my poor hands to the bone for you, without any wages, God bless your bonny face!' That's what he'd say. And he'd snivel a bit as he said it. So would the audience."

"Faster!" urged Vail, with a covert look over his shoulder. "He's standing on the steps, looking after us. Hit the pace!"

CHAPTER V

ROBBER'S ROOST, UNINCORPORATED

FROM a roadhouse two miles away Thaxton called up Mrs. Horoson, his house-keeper. Without giving her a chance to protest he told her there would be six, besides himself, for dinner that night and that a Mr. and Mrs. Mosely were occupying the violet room.

He bade her break the news to Miss Gregg, on the latter's imminent return from Stormcrest, and to Miss Lane. Then he hung up, precipitately, and rejoined Chase in the road.

"Let's hustle!" he adjured. "She may find where we are from Central and follow us. I can count on Horoson not to decamp even if the servants do. But every now and then I feel toward her as I used to when I was a kid and she caught me stealing Uncle Oz's cigarettes. Hurry!"

It was within a half hour of dinner time when Vail and Chase, by devious back ways, returned to Vailholme and let themselves in at a rear door, preparatory to creeping upstairs to their rooms to dress for the seven-o'clock meal.

The dinner ordeal was one of unrelieved hideousness. But for gallant old Miss Gregg, the situation must have fallen asunder much sooner than it did. Thaxton Vail, at the table's head, writhed in misery. He had absolutely no idea how to handle the unhandleable situation.

It was Miss Gregg who, unasked, took control of everything. Being wholly fearless, she had no normal terror of the austere Horoson or of the ever-sourer-visaged Vogel.

During the endless wait before dinner was announced she slipped out to the dining room. Thaxton was there, flustered and curt, trying to coerce his rebellious upper servants into setting the wheels of domestic machinery into motion.

Vogel already had given warning, proclaiming briefly but proudly the list of his former super-excellent positions, and repeating, as a sort of eternal slogan of refrain that he was a butler and not a boarding-house head waiter.

It was at this point that Hester Gregg took charge.

Grateful and sweating, Vail went back to the living room to listen gloomily to the Moselys' recital to Chase and Doris of the various inns at which they had been either cheated or incompetently served. Though the couple did not say

so in actual words, Thaxton was left to infer that Vailholme combined the worst qualities of all their tour's other wretched stopping places.

As he listened to the tale, Miss Gregg swept into the room again with the pure exaltation in her eyes of one who has triumphed in a seemingly hopeless battle. Presently thereafter Vogel announced dinner.

As the party filed stragglingly into the dining room, Clive Creede came downstairs and joined them. He seemed a little better for his afternoon's rest, but still looked sick and shaky.

Thaxton's collie, as usual, accompanied Vail to the dining room, lying down majestically on the floor at the host's left. From the shelter of Joshua Q. Mosely's bulk appeared the obese police dog, who also had followed into the dining room. He disposed himself in a shadowy space, behind Mrs. Mosely's chair, where every passing servant must stumble unseeingly over him.

"I hope you don't mind our bringing Petty to dinner with us," said Joshua Q., as they sat down. "He's quite one of the family. The wife would as soon travel without her powder rag as without Petty. He goes everywhere with us. Nice collie you've got there. I notice you had to speak pretty firm to him, though, to keep

him from pestering poor Petty. Collies aren't as clever at minding as police dogs. Had him long?"

"He was bred by Mr. Creede, here," answered Thaxton. "When Mr. Creede went overseas, he left him at Vailholme."

"And when I got back," put in Clive, speaking for the first time, and addressing Doris, "Macduff had clean forgotten me and had adopted Thax. So I let him stay on here. Funny, wasn't it? I've heard collies never forget. I suppose that's another nature fake. For Macduff certainly had forgotten me. At least, he was civil to me, but he'd lost all interest in me."

Then fell a pause. Miss Gregg arose to the occasion by starting the conversation-ball to rolling again.

"I think," she said, "there ought to be a S. P. C. A. law against naming animals till they're grown. People call a baby pup 'Fluffy' or 'Beauty.' And then he grows up to look like Bill Sikes' dog. For instance, there's nothing 'petty' about that big police dog. Yet when he was a—"

"Oh," spoke up Mrs. Mosely, "his name isn't

really 'Petty.' 'Petty' is short for 'Pet.' His real name's 'Pet.' He—"

Willis Chase cleared his throat portentously. Leaning far across the table, he addressed the miserable Thaxton.

"Landlord!" he began, in awful imitation of the pompous Joshua Q. Mosely. "Landlord, me good man, I—"

"Shut up!" snarled Vail, under his breath, glaring murderously.

A smile of utter sweetness overspread Willis Chase's long countenance.

"Tut, tut!" he chided, patronizingly. "Don't cringe, when I address you, my honest fellow! Don't be servile, just because I am a gentleman and your own lot is cast among the working classes. I have every respect for the dignity of labor. I don't look down on you. In Heaven's sight all men are equal—landlords and gentlemen and day laborers and plumbers and senators and bootleggers and authors and—"

"That sounds fine in theory, Mr.—Mr. Case, is it?" boomed Joshua Q. "But it don't work out always in real life. Not that I look down on a man just because he's got to run an inn or a boarding house to make a living. Nor yet

I don't really look down on day laborers. Nor yet on plumbers. Not even on authors—when they keep their place. But what's it to profit those of us who've made good and won our way to the leisure classes, as you might say? What's it to profit us if we're to be put on a level with folks who get paid for serving us? Money's got to count for *something*, hasn't it? If a man's got the brain and the genius and the push to pile up a fortune, don't he deserve to stand a notch higher than the boob who ain't—who *hasn't*? Don't he? Position means something. It—”

“And family, too!” chimed in Mrs. Mosely, with much elegance of diction. “I always tell Mr. M. that family counts every bit as much as money, or it ought to. Even in these democratic days. I believe in family. I don't boast of it. But I believe in it. While I don't brag about my grandfather being the first Governor of—”

“Grandfathers!” sighed Willis Chase, ecstatically. “Now you've touched my own hobby, Mrs.—Mrs. Mousely. I—”

“Mosely,” corrected Joshua Q., with much dignity. “And—”

“To be sure,” apologized Chase, meekly. “My mistake. But I murmur ‘Amen!’ to all you

say about family and grandfathers. I even go a step beyond. I even believe in pride of *great-grandfathers*."

"Why—why, cert'nly," assented Mrs. Mosely, albeit with a shade less assurance. "Of course. "And—"

"My own greatgrandfather," expounded Willis, unctuously, "my own great-grandfather, Colonel Weilguse Chase, was the first white man to be hanged in New Jersey. Not that I brag unduly of it. Yet it is sweet to remember, in this age of so-called equality. . . . Landlord, these trout are probably more or less fit to eat. But my doctor forbids me to guzzle fish. I wonder if I might trouble you to order a little fried tripe for me? I am willing to pay extra for it, of course. Nothing sets off a dinner like a side dish of fried tripe. Or, still better, a nice juicy slice of roast shoulder of tripe. But, speaking of family—"

"I'm afraid you don't just get my point, Mr. Case," interposed Mrs. Mosely. "I mean about family. I don't believe in pride of ancestors—merely *as* ancestors. But I believe in being proud of ancestors who achieved something worth while. Do you see the distinction?"

"Certainly," agreed Chase, with much pro-

fundity. "And I feel the same way. Now, out of all the millions of white men, great and small, who from time to time have infested New Jersey, there could be but *one* 'first white man' hanged there. And that startling honor was reserved for my own great-grandfather. Not that I brag of it—as I said. But people like you and myself, Mrs. Mousely, can at least be honestly proud of our ancestors. Now, I suppose our genial landlord here—"

"Luella!" boomed Joshua Q. Mosely, in sudden comprehension. "This—this person is pokin' fun at you. I'll thank you, young man—"

"Speaking of family," deftly intervened Miss Gregg, while Mosely and Vail, from opposite sides of the table, looked homicide at the unruffled Chase, "speaking of family, Clive, you remember the Bacons, who used to live just beyond Canobie, don't you? Your father asked pompous old Standish Bacon if he happened to be descended from Sir Francis Bacon. He answered: 'Sir Francis left no descendants. But if he had, I should be one of them.' He—"

"If Mr. Case thinks it is a gentlemanly thing to insult—" boomed Joshua Q., afresh.

"That's just like Bacon," cut in Clive Creede,

coming to the old lady's rescue. "My father used to say—"

Then he fell silent, as though his tired mind was not equal to further invention. He did not so much as recall the possibly mythical Bacon, and he had not the energy to improvise further.

But Miss Gregg's mind was never tired, nor was her endurance-trained tongue acquainted with weariness. And before Mosely could boom his protest afresh, she was in her stride once more.

"You're right," she assured Clive. "He was just that sort. If Standish Bacon had lived in Bible times, he'd never have been content to be one of the Apostles. He'd have insisted on being all twelve of them and a couple of the High Priests thrown in. Doris, you'll remember the time I told him that?"

"Yes," assented the girl, breaking involuntarily into the queer little child-laugh that Vail loved. "I do, indeed. And I remember what he answered. He—"

"If Mr. Case—" blustered the undeterred Mosely.

"I'd forgotten that part of it," purred Miss Gregg, ignoring Joshua Q. "I remember now. He said, in that stiff old-fashioned way of his:

‘Madam, you exaggerate. Yet in all modesty I may venture to believe that if I had lived in Bible times, my unworthy name might have had the honor to be mentioned in that Book of Books. Lesser folk than myself were mentioned there by name. Fishermen and tanners and coppersmiths and the like.’ ”

“No?” exploded Vail. “Did Bacon really say that? The old windbag! And you let him get away with it, Miss Gregg? I should have thought—”

“No,” replied the old lady, complacently. “I can’t say I really ‘let him get away with it.’ At least, not very far away. I’m afraid I even lost my gentle temper, and that for once in my life I was just a little rude. I said to him: ‘Why, Standish Bacon, you couldn’t have gotten your name in Holy Writ if you’d lived through every one of its books. You couldn’t even have gotten in by name if you’d broken up one of St. Paul’s most crowded meetings at Ephesus. The best mention you could have hoped to get for that would have been a verse, tucked away somewhere in the middle of a chapter, in the Epistle to the Ephesians. A verse like this: *‘And it came to pass in those days that a Certain Man*

of Ephesus busted up the meeting! Bacon didn't like it very well. But he—"

Joshua Q. Mosely and his glaringly indignant wife had been shut out of the talk as skillfully as Miss Gregg's ingenuity could devise. But mere ingenuity cannot forever hold its own against a bull-bellow voice. Now as the old lady still rambled on, Joshua Q. burst forth again:

"Excuse me for speaking out of turn, as the feller said!" he declaimed. "But I want this Case person to know— Hey, there!" he broke off, in dismay. "What's happenin'?"

For again the substance of his diatribe was shattered.

This time the needed and heaven-sent interruption did not come from Miss Gregg, but from Macduff and Petty.

Thaxton, absent-mindedly, had tossed a fragment of trout to Macduff on the floor beside him. He had long since dropped into the habit of giving the collie surreptitious tidbits during the course of a meal. Macduff was wont to accept them gravely, and he never begged.

But to-night, from his post behind Mrs. Mosely's chair, the ever-hungry police dog

caught sight of the tossed morsel. He lumbered forward to grab it. Macduff daintily picked up and swallowed the food, a second before Petty could seize it.

Angry at loss of the prize and at another dog daring to get ahead of him, Petty launched himself at the unsuspecting collie, driving his teeth into Macduff's fur-armored neck.

The collie resented this egregious attack by writhing out from under his assailant, wrenching free from the half-averted grip, and flying at the police dog's throat.

In a flash of time an industrious and racketsy dog fight was in progress all over the dining room.

One of the maids screeched. Every one jumped up. A chair was overturned bangingly. Mrs. Mosely shrieked:

“The brute is murdering poor darling Petty! *Help!*”

Excited past all caution, she dashed between the rearing and roaring combatants just as Thaxton Vail recovered enough presence of mind to shout imperatively to his collie.

At the command Macduff ceased to lay on. Turning reluctantly, he walked back to his master. Joshua Q. Mosely, meantime, had flung

his incalculable weight upon the bellicose Petty, pinning the luckless police dog to the floor. The fight was over.

Mrs. Mosely's shrill voice, raised in anguish, soared above the hubbub.

"He's bitten me!" she cried, nursing a bony finger whose knuckle bore a faint abrasion from the glancing eyetooth of one of the warriors. "That wretched collie has bitten me!"

Then it was that Joshua Q. Mosely proved himself a master of men and of situations. Holding the fat police dog by the studded collar, he drew himself to his full height.

"Come up to the room, Luella!" he bade his hysterical wife. "I'll wash out the cut for you and bind it up nice. If it's bad, we'll have a doctor for it. As for you," he continued, glowering awesomely upon Vail, "you're just at the first of what you're going to get for this. You tried to keep us from stopping here. Then you egged on one of your other guests to insult Mrs. M. at the table. And now your dog attacks ours and then bites my wife. We're going to the room. To-morrow morning we'll have breakfast in it. You can send up the bill at the same time. Because I don't mean to sully my eyes or Mrs. M.'s by looking on your face again.

As soon as breakfast's over we are leaving. At the first police station I shall lodge complaint against you for maintaining a vicious dog, a menace to public safety. And I'm going to write this whole affair to my counsel and instruct him to institoot action. Come, Luella."

Out of the room they strode, Petty lugged protestingly along between them. Miss Gregg broke the instant of dread silence by saying decisively:

"I'm not surprised. I make it a rule never to be surprised at anything said or done by a man who calls his wife 'Mrs. M.' or 'Mrs. Any-Other-Initial,' or who speaks of '*the* room.' And their fat dog was the only one of them that didn't eat fish with a knife. Just the same, Willis, you ought to be spanked! I'm ashamed of you. It was all your fault; for trying to be funny with people outside your own class. That's as dangerous as massaging a mule's tail, and ten times as inexcusable."

"I'm awfully sorry," said Chase, remorsefully. "Honestly, I am. The only bright side to it is the man's promise that we'll not see either of them again. I'm sorry, Thax. I—"

Down the stairs clattered two pairs of bumpily running feet. Into the dining room burst a

flamingly red and bellowing Joshua Q. Mosely, his wife spluttering along at his heels.

"We been robbed!" squealed Mosely, too upset to remember to boom.

"*What?*" gasped Vail, as the others stared open-mouthed.

Mosely repeated his clarion announcement:

"Robbed! Mrs. M.'s jewel case pinched right out of her locked bag. Twelve thousand dollars' worth of joolry stolen. It was there when we come down to dinner, and now it's gone, and the bag is busted open. I—"

"What are you talking about?" demanded Thaxton. "You can't have been robbed—*here!* What—?"

"Can't, hey?" roared Mosely, his emotion scaling to the secondary stage. "Can't, hey?" he reiterated as he advanced on Vail with swinging fists. "Well, we *have!* You've had us cleaned out! You run a robber's roost here, you dirty thief!"

Furious past further articulate words, Joshua Q. shook a hamlike fist in Thaxton's astonished face. Vail stepped in under the flailing arm. Then he proceeded, quietly and scientifically, to knock the giant down.

After which, everything happened at once.

CHAPTER VI

THE POLICE AND THE DUKE OF ARGYLE

TEN minutes later they trailed downstairs from a mournful inspection of the violet room. There could be no doubt as to the truth of what Joshua Q. Mosely had told them. The smallest of the traveling bags heaped in a corner of the room had been broken open. So had the flimsy lock of the chased silver jewel box it contained.

The thief, apparently, had made brief examination of the various bags in the jumbled heap until he had come upon the only one that was locked. Then with a sharp knife or razor he had slit the russet leather along the hinge, had thrust his hand in and had drawn forth the silver box. It had been absurdly simple to force the lock of this. Probably it had yielded to the first heave of the knifeblade in the crack under the lid.

The window screens had not been disturbed, nor were the vines outside broken or disarranged.

Mosely declared he had left locked the room door when he came down to dinner; and had pocketed the key. Clive Creede's comment on this information was to go to the door of the next room, extract its key and fit it in the door of the violet room. It turned the wards with entire ease.

"Most of the doors in private houses," said Clive, by way of explanation, "have standard uniform locks. Any one who wanted to get in here could have borrowed the key of any door along the hallway. You say you found the door wide open when you came back?"

"Yep," said Mosely, unconsciously nursing his fast-swelling jawpoint. "That's what made us suspicious. So we switched on the light. And there was this bag, on top of the rest, all bust open. So we—"

He refrained from repeating, for the ninth time, his entire windy recital and mutteringly followed the others down to the living room.

"You look kind of tuckered out, young man," he said, not unkindly, to Clive as he and Creede brought up the rear of the procession.

"I am," replied Clive. "This shock and the scene at dinner and the dog fight and your mix-up with Vail—well, they aren't the best things

for a sick man. They've started my head to aching again."

"H'm! Too bad!" commented Mosely. "But not so bad as if you'd lost \$12,000 worth of good joolry. . . . I s'pose I spoke a little too quick when I told Mr. Vail he was a crook and said he ran a robber's roost. But he had no call to knock me down. I didn't carry it any further; because I don't believe in fisticuffs before ladies. But I warn you I'm going to summons you folks as witnesses in the assault-and-battery suit I bring against him. The young ruffian!"

"If you're wise, Mr. Mosely," suggested Clive, his usual calm manner sharpening, "you'll bring no suit. You'll let that part of the matter drop as suddenly as you yourself dropped. If we have to testify that he knocked you down, we'll also testify to what you called him and that you shook your fist at him in what looked like a menace. Such a gesture constitutes what lawyers call 'technical assault.' No jury will convict Vail for self-defense. As for your loss—even if this were a regular hotel—you surely must know a proprietor is not responsible for valuables left in a guest's room. I'm sorry for you. But you seem to have no redress."

Mosely glowered blackly. Then, without an-

swearing, he turned his back on Creede and stamped into the living room.

“Telephoned the police yet?” he demanded of Vail.

“No,” said Thaxton. “Call them up yourself if you like. The main phone is out there at the back of the hall. Call up the Aura police station. I suppose we come within its jurisdiction more than Lenox’s.”

Mosely departed in search of the telephone. His wife stood in the doorway, wringing her hands.

“Oh, if we’d only left Petty on guard up there!” she wailed. “We always feel so safe when Petty is on guard! Mr. Vail, I’m certain this is an inside job. It—”

“Yes,” assented Willis Chase. “That’s what the police are certain to say, anyhow. When they can’t find out anything else, they always label it an ‘inside job’ and behave as if that explained everything.”

“What is an ‘inside job’?” asked Creede. “It sounds familiar. But—”

“An inside job is a job the police can’t find a clue to,” explained Chase. “So they leave the rest of the work to the detectives. That’s the climax. When a policeman blows out his brains

and survives, they make a detective of him. Why, Thax, don't you remember when the Conant house was robbed and the—”

“Yes,” answered Vail, grinning at the memory. “I remember. That was the time Chief Quimby's box of safety matches got afire in his hip pocket while he was on his hands and knees looking for clues. And you tried to extinguish the blaze by kicking him. I remember he wanted to jail you for ‘kicking an officer in pursuit of his duty.’ You said his hip pocket wasn't ‘out yet but seemed to be under control.’”

While they had been talking, Miss Gregg and Doris had come quietly into the room. Both were a trifle paler than usual, but otherwise were unruffled. A moment later Mosely returned from his telephone colloquy with the police.

“The chief says he'll be right over,” he reported. “He asked if any other rooms had been robbed. And I felt like a fool, to have to tell him we hadn't even looked.”

“If you had waited a minute longer, before leaving the telephone,” spoke up Miss Gregg, “you could have told him that at least one more room had been ransacked. My niece and I stopped in our suite, on the way down, just now.

Her little jewel case and the chamois bag I kept my rings and things in—both of them are gone.”

“Miss Gregg!” exclaimed Vail. “Not really? Oh, I’m so sorry! So—”

A babel of other sympathetic voices drowned his stammered condolences. Out of the babel emerged Willis Chase’s query.

“Were they locked up?”

“Yes, and no,” returned Miss Gregg. “We locked them in the second drawer of the dresser and hid the key. But being only normal women and not Sherlockettes, of course we quite overlooked locking the top drawer. The top drawer has been carefully taken out and laid on the bed. And the case and the chamois bag have been painlessly extracted from the second drawer. It was so simple! I quite envy the brain of that thief. It is a lesson worth the price of the things he took—if only they had belonged to some one else. . . .

“Thax Vail!” she broke off indignantly. “Stop looking as if you’d been slapped! You’re not going to feel badly about this. I forbid you to. Here we all forced ourselves upon you, and turned your home upside down, against your will! And if we’re the losers, it’s our own fault, not yours. We—”

She stopped her efforts at consolation, catching sight of Clive Creede, who slipped unobtrusively into the room. A minute earlier she had seen him go out and had heard his step on the stairs.

“Well,” she challenged, as she peered up shrewdly into his troubled white face. “Another county heard from? How much?”

Clive laughed, in an assumption of carelessness, and glanced apologetically at Thaxton.

“Not much,” he made shift to answer the garrulous old lady. “Just a little bunch of bills I’d left on my chiffonier and—and a watch. That’s all.”

“The Argyle watch?” cried Miss Lane, in genuine concern. “Not the Argyle watch. Oh, you poor boy!”

“What might the Argyle watch be?” acidly queried Mrs. Mosely. “It must be something priceless, since it seems to stir you people up more than our \$12,000 loss. But then—of course—”

“The Argyle watch,” explained Doris, forestalling a hot rejoinder from Vail, “is a big, old-fashioned, gold, hunting-case watch that the Duke of Argyle offered as a scholarship prize once at the University of Edinburgh. Mr.

Creede's father won it, as a young man. And it was his dearest possession. I don't wonder Mr. Creede feels so about its loss. He—"

"The Duke of Argyle?" repeated Mosely, lifted momentarily from his daze of grief by sound of so magic and familiar a name. "The one who invented the scratching posts that made folks say 'God bless the Duke of Argyle'? I read about him in a book. Was he the same one?"

"No," said Willis Chase, "this was the one who put up sandpaper pillars on the border for Highlanders to rub the burrs off their dialect. He was the laird of Hootmon Castle, syne aboon the sonsie Lochaber."

Once more Mosely favored the flippant youth with a scowl of utter disgust. Then, turning to the rest, he said:

"An idea has just hit me. I warn you I'm going to mention it to the police as soon as they get here. We came down to this room before dinner, and we had to wait around here for pretty near half an hour before we were called in to eat. Mr. Vail, you sneaked out of the room after we were here. And you were gone ten minutes or more. Long enough to—"

"To rob all my guests?" supplemented Vail.

“Quite so. I’m sorry to spoil such a pleasant theory. But I was in the dining room trying to quell a servile insurrection—trying to stave off a domestic strike—so that you might get a decently appointed dinner instead of having to forage in the ice box after the servants quit.”

“That’s your version, hey?” grated Mosely. “Most likely you can bribe one or two of your servants to back it up, too.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Mosely,” put in Miss Gregg, as Vail choked back a retort. “I’m as sorry as Mr. Vail to spoil your perfectly beautiful theory. But our sinning host happens to be telling the truth. In fact, it is a habit of his. I know he’s telling the truth because I went out there to re-enforce him just as he was losing the battle against butler and housekeeper combined, with the cook as auxiliary reserve. Of course, *I* may be bribed, too, in my testimony, for all you know. So if you care to—”

“I never doubt a lady’s word, ma’am,” said Mosely with ponderous gallantry.

“Why not?” insisted Miss Gregg. “It’s far safer than doubting Thaxton Vail’s. To save my life, I couldn’t hit as clean a blow or as hard a blow as the one that gave your chin that lovely

mauve lump on it. Thax, you're something of a fool, but you're something more of a man. I never saw any one knocked down before. Except on the stage. I ought to have been sickened by the brutal sight. But I confess it thrilled me. I got the same reaction from it that I always get when the full *Messiah* Chorus bursts into the 'Hallelujah.' It—"

"Auntie!" cried Doris, scandalized.

"So did *you*, for that matter!" accused the old lady. "Your eyes were like a pair of overgrown stars. They—"

"Suppose," broke in Doris, reddening painfully, "suppose the rest of us see if the thief visited us. Then we can have a full report to make when the chief comes. Let's see—Auntie and I—the Moselys—Clive—oh, yes—Willis Chase! Is—"

"I saw him start upstairs a second ago," said Vail. "He—"

"And, by the way," exclaimed Joshua Q., on new inspiration, "Case didn't come into the dining room till we had all sat down. He hurried in later than—"

"Chase is always hurrying in 'later than,'" said Miss Gregg. "It's his one claim to distinc-

tion. He is never on time anywhere. I'm afraid your new theory won't hold water any more than the other did, Mr. Mosely."

"If it comes to that," suggested Clive Creede, "I got downstairs after all the rest of you did. Just as you were starting in to dinner. I was almost as late as Chase. There's as much reason to suspect me as to suspect him, Mr. Mosely."

"No," denied Joshua Q., judicially, "there don't seem to be. I can't agree with you. The cases might be the same, if you hadn't lost money and a watch. It isn't likely you robbed yourself. Especially of a watch like that Argyle one you think so much of. That watch seems to be pretty well known to the other folks here. And if it's known to them, it must be known by sight to lots of others. After saying it was stolen you couldn't ever let it be seen again if you'd just pretended to steal it. No, that lets you out, I guess."

"Thanks," said Creede. "I am glad you honor me with such perfect trust."

He spoke crossly. His face was dead white and was creased with pain-lines. Very evidently he was in acute suffering. Doris looked at him with worried sympathy. Thaxton Vail

saw the look, and he was ashamed of the sharp pang of jealousy which cut into him.

Vail knew enough of women at large and of Doris Lane in particular to realize that Clive Creede, bearing sickness and pain so bravely, was by far a more dangerous rival than Clive Creede in the glow of health. He was disgusted at himself for his own involuntary jealousy toward the man who was his lifelong friend.

He moved over to where Clive stood wearily leaning against the wall.

“Sit down, old man,” he said, drawing a big chair toward him. “You’re all in. This has been too much for you. We—”

“I beg to report,” interrupted Willis Chase, airily, coming back from his tour of inspection, “I beg to report the total loss of a watch and my roll and my extra set of studs. The watch was not given to my father by the Duke of Argyle. But it was given to my father’s only son, by Mr. Tiffany, as a prize for giving the said Mr. Tiffany a check for \$275. The transaction was carried on through one of his clerks, of course, but that makes it none the less hallowed. Besides—”

“This seems to put it up pretty stiffly to the

servants," said Mosely. "The police better begin with them. By the way, I suppose you've made sure, Mr. Vail, that none of them could sneak away, before the chief gets here."

"No," answered Thaxton, annoyed. "I never thought of it. But I'm certain I can trust them. They have been with me a long time, most of them. And—"

"Young man," exhorted Mosely, from the depths of his originality, "if you had had as much business experience as I've had you'd know it's the most trusted employee who does the stealing."

"Naturally," assented Miss Gregg. "Why not? The trusted employees are the only ones who get a chance to handle the valuables. That's one of the truisms nobody thinks of—just as people praise Robin Hood because he always robbed the rich and never molested the poor. Why should he have molested the poor? If they'd been worth robbing, they wouldn't have been poor. And it's the same with—"

The chug and rattle of a motor car at the porte-cochère checked her. A minute later two men were ushered into the room by the awe-stricken Vogel. They were Reuben Quimby, the Aura police chief, and one of his constables.

CHAPTER VII

FAITH AND UNFAITH AND SOME MOONLIGHT

THE lanky chief did not appear at all excited. Indeed, he and his assistant went about their work with a quiet routine method that verged on boredom. They made a perfunctory tour of the robbed rooms; then they convened an impromptu court of inquiry in the living room, Quimby bidding Vogel and Mrs. Horoson to collect the entire service staff of house and grounds in the dining room and to herd them there until they should be called for, one by one.

Then after listening gravely to Vail's account of the affair and with growing impatience to Joshua Q. Mosely's longer and more dramatic recital, Quimby announced that the interrogation would begin. Thaxton was the first witness.

"Mr. Vail," asked the chief, "what did *you* lose? I don't see your list on this inventory of stolen goods you've made out for me."

Vail looked blank.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "I never

thought to look. I was so bothered about the others' losses I clean forgot—"

"Suppose you go and look now," hinted the chief. "Be as quick as you can. We'll delay the interrogation till you come back."

Thaxton returned to the improvised courtroom in less than three minutes.

"Not a thing missing, so far as I can see," he reported. "And nothing disturbed. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, Chief. I seem to be the only one who escaped a visit from the thief."

Clive Creede had been slumping low in the chair which Vail had brought him. Now, breathing hard, he got weakly to his feet and lurched through the open French window out onto the moonlit veranda.

He made his exit so unobtrusively that no one but Doris Lane chanced to note it. The girl, at sight of his haggard face and stumbling gait, followed Creede out into the moonlight. She found him leaning against one of the veranda pillars, drawing in great breaths of the cool night air.

"Are you worse?" she asked in quick anxiety. "Why don't you go to bed? You're not fit to be up."

"Oh, I'm all right," he declared, pluckily, as

he straightened from his crumpled posture. "Don't worry about me. Only—the room was so close and so crowded and so noisy—and I felt dizzy—and I had to come out here for a lungful of fresh air. I'll go back presently."

She hesitated, as though about to return to the others. But the sick man looked so forlorn and weak she disliked to leave him alone. Yet, knowing how sensitive he was in all things regarding his health, she masked her intent under pretense of lingering for a chat.

"I wonder if it was really an 'inside job,' " she hazarded. "If it was, of course it must have been one of the servants. And I hate to believe that. We know every one else concerned, and we know we are all honest. That is, we know every one but the Moselys. And they couldn't very well have done it, could they?"

"They couldn't have done it at all," he said, emphatically. "I know. Because you said they were the first people in the living room, waiting for dinner. I came down nearly half an hour later. I had overslept. When I changed to dinner clothes, I left my watch and my cash on my chiffonier. They were stolen. The Moselys had been downstairs a long time. And they didn't go up again till they went after that dog-

fight. And then they weren't gone two minutes before they came rushing back to tell us they'd been robbed. Not long enough for them to ransack a single unfamiliar room, to say nothing of my room and Chase's and yours. No, we must leave the Moselys out of it."

"Then it must be one of the servants, of course," decided Doris.

"I wish I dared hope so," muttered Clive, almost too low for her to catch the words.

"What do you mean?" she asked in surprise.

"I mean," he said, wretchedly, "I mean it would be better to find out that one of them had robbed us than if— Oh, I don't mean anything at all!" he ended, in sulky anticlimax.

She stared at him with wonder.

"I don't understand you," she said. "We've just proved it couldn't be any one but the servants, unless, of course, it was done by some professional thief who got in. And that doesn't seem likely."

"No," he said, shortly. "It doesn't. It was done from the inside. That's proved. . . . Let's talk about something else, shan't we?"

But Doris's curiosity was piqued by his eagerness to sheer away from the theme.

"Tell me," she insisted.

"Tell you what?" he countered, sullenly.

"Tell me whom you suspect," returned Doris. "You suspect some one. I know you do. Who is it?"

"I didn't say I suspected any one," he made troubled answer. "I'd rather not talk about it at all, if you don't mind."

"But I *do* mind," she protested. "Why, Clive, all of us have been living here in this corner of the Berkshires every summer since we were born! We've all known one another all our lives. It's—it's a terrible thing to feel that one of us may be a thief. Won't you tell me whom you suspect?"

Clive looked glumly down into her appealingly upraised face for a moment. Then he squared his shoulders and spoke.

"You've asked for it," said he, speaking between his shut teeth and with growing reluctance. "I'd give ten years' income not to tell you—and I'd give ten years of my life not to believe it's he."

"Who?"

He hesitated. Then, a tinge of evasion in his unhappy voice, he replied:

"Every one of us was robbed. . . . Except one."

She frowned, perplexed.

“What’s that got to do with it?” she asked. “Thax was the only one of us who wasn’t robbed. That doesn’t answer my question at all.”

He said nothing.

“Clive Creede!” she burst forth, incredulously. “Do you mean to say you are—are—*imbecile* enough to believe such a thing of Thax? Why, I— *Clive!*”

There was a world of amazed contempt in her young voice. The man winced. Yet he held his ground doggedly.

“Don’t misunderstand me,” he said. “I know, as well as you do, that Thax didn’t do it through dishonesty or because he needed the money. He has more cash now than he can spend. But—”

“Then why—”

“Either he did it as a mammoth practical joke or else—”

“Thax is not a practical joker,” she interpolated. “No one but a fool plays practical jokes.”

“Or else,” he resumed, “he did it to get rid of his unwelcome guests. That is the most likely solution.”

“The most likely solution,” she said hotly,

“the *only* sane solution is that he didn’t do it at all. It’s absurd to think he did. He—”

“He is the only one of us who wasn’t robbed,” persisted Clive. “He is the only one of us familiar enough with every room and every piece of furniture to have gone through the house so quickly and so thoroughly, taking only the most valuable things from each of them. Nobody else would have had time to or a chance to. He is the only one of us who could have been seen going from room to room without being suspected. I thought of all that. But I wouldn’t believe it till he said himself just now that he hadn’t been robbed. That proved it to me. That’s why I came out here. It turned me sick to think—”

“Clive,” said the girl, quietly, “either the war or else those exploding chemicals in your Rackrent Farm laboratory seems to have had a distressing effect on your mentality. I’ve known you ever since I was born. In the old days you could never have made yourself believe such a thing of Thax Vail. You know you couldn’t. Oh, if—”

Her sweet voice trembled. She turned away, staring blindly out into the moonlight.

"I'm sorry," said Clive, briefly.

He hesitated, looking in distress at her averted head. Then with a catch of the breath he turned and strode into the living room.

Doris took a step toward the French window to follow him. But there were tears in her eyes, and she felt strangely shaken and unhappy from her talk with Creede. She did not wish the others to see her until she should have had time to recover her self-control. Wherefore she remained where she was.

She was dully astonished that Clive's disbelief in Vail should have moved her so profoundly. She had not realized, until she heard him attacked, all that Thaxton was coming to mean to her. A glimpse of this new wonder-feeling had been vouchsafed her when she saw Vail knock down a man so much larger and bulkier than himself. The sight had thrilled her unaccountably. But it had been as nothing to the reaction at hearing his honesty doubted.

Long she stood there, forcing herself to look in the face this astounding situation wherein her heart had so imperceptibly floundered. At last, turning from her blind survey of the moon-flooded lawn, she moved toward the living room.

At her first step she paused. Some one was

rounding the house from the front, treading heavily on the rose-bordered gravel path that skirted the veranda. Doris waited for the newcomer to draw nearer.

On came the heavy, fast-moving steps. And now they were mounting the veranda's side stair. In the moonlight, the face and body of a man were clearly revealed.

CHAPTER VIII

THE INQUISITION

AT first glance the man was Clive Creede. And Doris wondered how he chanced to have left the house and to have approached the veranda in such a roundabout way.

Then, as he stood before her, she saw he was not in dinner clothes, but in a dark lounge suit. And as he lifted his soft hat at sight of her, she saw his forehead was bald and that he wore spectacles. Also that there was a sagging stoop to his shoulders and the hint of a limp in his walk.

Clive's twin brother was the last man she cared to meet in her present tumultuous frame of mind. At best she had never been able to bring herself to like him. Yet he had come too close now to be avoided without rudeness.

As he recognized her, Osmun Creede took an impulsively eager step forward.

"Why, Doris!" he exclaimed joyously. "This is better luck than I looked for. What on earth are you doing at Vailholme? And why are you

out here all alone? Doesn't the same moon that interests you interest Clive or Vail?"

"Oh, you've come to see Clive?" she asked, trying to speak civilly and not to let herself be annoyed by the man's awkward attempts at banter.

"Yes," said Osmun. "He's stopping with Vail till his house gets disinfected or loses the reek of some chemicals that made him sick. Why he should choose to come here instead of to his own brother's home," he added bitterly, "is a mystery to me. Probably he has his own reasons. Anyhow, I came over to see if he is better and if there's anything I can do for him. I didn't ring because I saw through the windows that there's a party of some kind going on. I saw a bunch of people in the living room. And I'm in tramping clothes. I came around to the side door, on the chance of finding a servant I could send upstairs to Clive to find how he is."

"Clive was out here five minutes ago," she replied. "He went back to the interrogation. I'll—"

"Interrogation?" repeated Osmun, puzzled. "Is it a game? Or—?"

Briefly she outlined to the dumbfounded man

the story of the evening's events. He listened, open-mouthed, his face, in the moonlight, blank with crass incredulity. The instant she paused he began to hurl questions at her. Impatiently she answered them. But in their mid-flow she turned away and walked to the long window.

"I'm afraid I must go in," she said, stiffly, his avid curiosity and his evident relish of the affair jarring her unaccountably. "They may want to interrogate me, too. The chief was going to examine us all, I believe. You'll excuse me?"

"I'll do better than that," he assured her. "I'll come along. I wouldn't miss this thing for a million."

Before she could deter him he had stepped past her and had flung wide the French window. Standing aside, he motioned her to pass through. She hesitated. Chief Quimby, catching sight of her on the threshold, beckoned her in.

"We wondered where you were, Miss Lane," said he. "We've been waiting for you. Every one else has been questioned. Come in, please."

Reluctantly she entered. Osmun Creede pressed in, at her heels, closing the window behind him. The guests were seated in various parts of the living room, one and all looking thoroughly uncomfortable. At a table sat the

chief. Beside him, holding an open note book, sat the constable.

Through the doorway Doris could see in the hall a flustered group of servants, babbling in excited whispers. One woman among them was repeating sniffingly at intervals that she was a respectable working girl and that never before in her life had any one asked her such a passel of turrible questions and she was going to pack up and leave right away and she'd have the law on them that had asked was she a thief!

Quimby seemed to note the presence of this offstage chorus at the same time as did Doris. For he turned to the housekeeper who stood primly in a far corner:

"You can send them back to the kitchen quarters, Mrs. Horoson," he said. "I'm through with them for the present. Only see none of them leave the house. Let them understand that any one who tries to sneak out will be followed and arrested. I shall take it as an indication of guilt. That is all, Mrs. Horoson. We shan't need you or Vogel any more either. Or if we do I'll ring for you."

"Where is Clive?" Osmun asked Willis Chase, who had greeted the unpopular twin's advent with the briefest of nods.

“Gone up to bed,” answered Chase. “Went up as soon as the chief had finished asking him a handful of questions. Said he felt rotten. Looked it, too. Chief excused him. He has the two East rooms, if you want to go up and see him.”

“I shall, presently,” said Osmun. “This is too interesting to leave just yet.”

He listened to the chief’s few queries of Doris as to the discovery that her jewel-box had been stolen. Doris replied clearly and to the point, her testimony confirming in all details the story her aunt had just told.

The last witness being examined, the lanky chief leaned back in his chair beating a tattoo on his teeth with the pencil he carried. Then he glanced at his notes and again at the inventory on the table before him.

“I am convinced,” he said slowly, “that all you people have told me the truth. And I am inclined to believe the servants have done the same. Taking into consideration their flurry and scare, they told remarkably straight stories, and it seems clear that none of them were absent from their duties in the kitchen or in the dining room long enough to have run upstairs and robbed so many rooms and then to have got-

ten back unnoticed. It seems none of them had even gone up so early to arrange the bedrooms for the night. And there is positively no sign, outdoors or in, that any professional thief broke into the house. Of course, a closer search of the rooms and a search of the servants and of their quarters—and of yourselves, if you will permit—may throw new light on the case. But—”

He paused. On these summer people and on others of their clan depended ninety per cent of Aura's livelihood and importance. Quimby had tried, therefore, to handle this delicate matter in such a way as to avoid offense. And, thus far, he had not a ghost of a clue to go on.

“Search away—as far as I'm concerned,” spoke up Willis Chase, in the short pause which followed. “Three times, on the Canadian border, I've had my car searched for bootleg booze. And every time I hit the New York Customs crowd, on my way back from Europe, they search my soiled collars and trunkbottoms with the most loving care. So this'll be no novelty. Search.”

“I have a horrible feeling that all the stolen things are going to be found on *me*,” supplemented Miss Gregg. “They would be, in a

nightmare, you know. And if this isn't a nightmare I don't know what nightmare is. But search if you like. The sooner it's over the sooner we'll wake up."

"I speak for the good wife as well as for myself," boomed Joshua Q. Mosely, "when I say we shall do all in our power to uphold the law. We are willing to be searched."

He gazed about him with the rarefied air of one who has just consented to part with life in the holy cause of duty.

"I am not going to be searched."

It was Thaxton Vail who said it. Every one turned with something akin to a jump and stared marvelingly at him.

"I am not going to be searched," he repeated, coming forward into the strong glare of lamp-light beside the table where sat the two officials. "And I am not going to permit my guests to be searched. When I say 'my guests,' I do not refer to Mr. and Mrs. Mosely, but to the friends whom I have known all my life. They are under my roof. They have suffered by being under my roof. Neither they nor myself shall be humiliated any further. I've listened patiently to this comic opera interrogation, and I have answered all questions put to me in the course

of it. But I'm not going to submit to the tomfoolery of a search. Please understand that clearly, Chief."

He sat down again. There was a confused rustle throughout the room. Joshua Q. Mosely glared at him with fearsome suspicion. Quimby cleared his throat, frowning. But before either could speak Osmun Creede had come forward out of the shadows to the area of light by the table.

"Chief," he said, his rasping voice cutting the room's looser sounds like a rusty file, "I'm the only person here who can't possibly be connected with the thefts. I didn't get here till five minutes ago, and I can prove by a dozen people that I was dining at the Country Club at the time the things were stolen. So I can speak disinterestedly."

"What's the sense of your speaking at all?" grumbled Chase. "It's no business of yours."

Unheeding, Osmun proceeded:

"Chief, you have established that some one in this house is a thief. That thief, presumably, had to do his work mighty fast and presumably he had no time to hide all his loot in a place safe enough to elude a police hunt. He had only a minute or two to do it in. There-

fore, the chances are that the bulkier or less easily hidden bits of plunder are still concealed on him. Perhaps all of it. Very good. It would be that man's natural impulse to resist search. Practically every one else here has volunteered to submit to search. One man only has refused. By an odd coincidence, that happens also to be the one man who was not robbed. Figure it out for yourself. It—"

"Oz Creede!" Miss Gregg declaimed, as the rest still sat dazed into momentary stillness at the unbelievable attack. "If you had the remotest idea how utterly vile and worthless you are, you'd bite yourself and die of hydrophobia. . . . I just thought I'd mention it," she added, apologetically, to Doris.

But Doris did not hear. The girl's glowing eyes were on Thaxton Vail, who had sprung to his feet and was advancing on his accuser.

"Oz," said Vail, his voice muffled and not quite firm, "I promised your brother I'd forget I had any grievance against you. May I trouble you to leave here before I forget that promise?—As quickly as you can, please."

"Hold on there!" blustered Joshua Q., billowing forward. "Hold on there! There seems to me to be a lot in what this young feller says.

He talks sense, Mr. Vail. And I believe he's right. This is no time to go trying to carry things highhanded. Chief, I demand—”

He broke off short in the rolling utterances, his mouth ajar, his little eyes bulging. Osmun Creede and Vail stood confronting each other. With a gesture as swift as the strike of a rattlesnake Osmun thrust out his right hand toward the left waistcoat pocket of Vail's dinner clothes.

Now he withdrew the questing hand and was holding it open for all to gaze on. In its palm glowed dully a huge old hunting-case watch.

“I caught sight of a bulge in that pocket,” he rasped. “So I took a chance at a search on my own account. Now I'll go. Not because you've ordered me out, Vail, but because I don't care to stay under the same roof with a man who robs his guests. Good-by.”

His words went unheard in the sudden babble of voices and the pressing forward of the rest. Every one was talking at once. The chief peered, hypnotized, at the watch Osmun had laid on the table in front of him. Vail, after a moment of stark blankness, lurched furiously at Creede, mouthing something which nobody could hear in the uproar.

The constable threw himself between Vail and

the sardonically smiling man. Before Thaxton could break free or recover his self-control Creede had left the room. But, in the hallway outside, during the moment's hush which followed the clamor, all could hear his strident voice as he shouted up the stairs:

"Clive! Come down here! Come down in a rush! The thief's found!"

Again Vail took a furious step in pursuit, but again the constable stepped officiously in front of him. And a second later the front door slammed.

"Stay where you are, everybody!" commanded the chief, a new sternness in his voice, as Willis Chase succeeded in working his way around the constable and Vail and made for the hall. "Where are you going, Mr. Chase?"

"I'm going to catch that swine!" yelled Willis, wrathfully, over his shoulder, pausing in the living room doorway as he cleared the last obstacle and sprang toward the hall. "I'm going to find him and bring him back by the scruff of the neck. And—"

The constable took a belated step to stop him. Chase turned and bolted. But as he did so, he collided violently with Clive Creede.

Clive had come downstairs at his brother's shouted summons, just in time to receive Chase's catapult rush.

Under the impact the sick man staggered and would have fallen had not Chase caught him. At the same time Thaxton Vail called sharply:

"Willis! Come back here! Don't make a fool of yourself! Come back. I don't need any one to fight my battles for me. I can attend to this myself."

Apologizing to the breathless Clive for the unintended collision and helping to steady the shaken man on his feet, Chase abandoned his plan to overtake and drag Osmun back by force. Sullenly he returned to the living room, Clive at his side. To the invalid's puzzled questions he returned no answer.

As they came in, Quimby was on his feet. His deferential manner was gone. The glint of the man hunt shimmered beneath his shaggy gray brows.

"Sit down, everybody!" he commanded. "Mr. Vail, I said, *sit down!* This case has taken a different turn. Let nobody leave the room. Whitcomb," to the constable, "stand at the door.

Now then, we'll tackle all this from another angle. The time for kid glove questioning is past."

He eyed them sternly, his gaze focusing last on Thaxton Vail. Then, as silence was restored, he picked up the watch and held it toward the blinkingly wondering Clive.

CHAPTER IX

A LIE OR TWO

“**M**R. CREEDE,” said he, “look carefully at this watch. Do you recognize it?”

“Of course I do,” replied Clive. “It’s mine. How did—?”

“This watch, Mr. Creede,” said the chief, slowly, “has just been turned over to me by your brother.”

“My brother?” asked Clive, surprised.

As he spoke his eyes searched the room, peering into the farther shadows in quest of Osmun.

“He has gone,” said the chief, reading the glance. “But before he went he pulled this watch out of the vest pocket of—Mr. Thaxton Vail. You admit it is yours. The watch that was stolen from your room this evening. Therefore—”

“Clive!” broke in Vail. “You know me well enough to—”

“Mr. Vail,” interrupted the chief, “it is my duty to warn you that anything you say may be

used against you. Now, then, Mr. Creede: You have identified this watch as the one stolen from you. It was taken from Mr. Vail's pocket in the presence of all of us. You can swear to the identification?"

"Hold on, please!" said Clive. "You're barking industriously, Chief. But you're barking up the wrong tree. That isn't the watch I lost."

"You said it was!" accused the chief. "You said—"

"I said nothing of the sort," denied Clive. "You asked me if I recognized the watch. And I said I did and that it was mine. I didn't say it was the one that was stolen to-night. And it isn't."

The house guests—to whom the Argyle watch was a familiar object—gaped. Thaxton Vail made as though to speak in quick disclaimer. But Clive's tired voice droned on as he met Quimby's suspicious eyes fairly and calmly.

"This watch is mine. It belonged to my father. It was one he had made the year before he died, with the Argyle watch as a model. And a very poor bit of work it was. For it has scarcely a look of the original. Last week at my Rackrent Farm house Mr. Vail dropped his repeater-watch and broke its mainspring. He

sent it to New York to be mended. And I lent him this second watch of mine to carry till his own comes back. That's what I meant just now when I said I recognized the watch and that it is mine."

"Clive!" sputtered Vail. "You're—"

"If my brother snatched this watch out of Mr. Vail's pocket," finished Clive, heedless of the interruption and with his eyes still holding the chief's, "then he did a mighty impertinent thing and one for which I apologize, in his name, to my host. That's all, Chief. The Argyle watch is still missing."

The stupidly coined lie deceived no one but the police, though Doris Lane felt a throb of admiration for the man who thus sought to shield his friend. The lie helped to blot from her memory Clive's earlier suspicion of Vail. She gave eager credit to the way wherein he defended the chum in whose guilt he really believed.

Old Miss Gregg reached out a wrinkled hand and patted Creede on the knee much as she might have patted the head of Macduff, the collie.

"You're a good boy, Clive," she whispered. "You always were. And, oh, it's so infinitely better to *do* good than just to *be* good! If—"

Thaxton Vail's fierce disclaimer drowned out her murmured words of praise.

"Chief," declared Vail, "my friend is saying all this to protect me. But I don't need any protection. That is the Argyle watch. Though how it happened to be in my pocket is more than I can guess. That's the stolen watch. I ought to know. I've seen it a thousand times ever since I was a child. And I never broke a repeater-watch at Mr. Creede's house. I never owned a repeater. And I never borrowed any watch from him. Also, to the best of my belief, his father never had a watch made to order. He always carried the Argyle watch, and I never heard of his having any other."

"Chief," interposed Clive, very quietly, as Vail paused for breath, "I have just told you the true story—the story I shall stick to, if necessary, on the witness stand. Please remember that. If I say that watch is not the stolen one any jury in the world will take my word as to my knowledge of my own property. And any accusation against Mr. Vail will appear very ridiculous. It will not add to your reputation. For your own sake I advise you to accept my statement at its face value."

"Drop that idiocy, Clive!" exhorted Vail

angrily. "I tell you I don't need any protection. And if I did I wouldn't take it in the form of a lie. You mean well. And I'm grateful to you. But—"

"That's my story, Chief," calmly repeated Creede.

Quimby was looking from one to the other of the two men in worried uncertainty. Both were rich and influential members of the Aura community. Both were lifelong dwellers in the region. The word of either, presumably, would carry heavy weight in court. Yet each flatly contradicted the other. The chief's brain began to buzz. Holding up the watch and facing the onlookers he asked:

"Can any of you identify this watch?"

No one spoke. Vail glanced from face to face. Every visage was either unwontedly pale or else unwontedly red. But nobody spoke. Clive Creede's eyes followed Vail's to the countenances of the spectators. In his sunken gaze was a world of appeal.

"Miss Gregg!" cried Thaxton at random. "You knew Clive's father for years. You've seen the Argyle watch ever so often. I call on you to identify it."

"My dear Thax," cooed the old lady, placidly,

“nothing on earth would give me greater joy than to identify it—except to identify the scoundrel who stole it.”

“There!” exclaimed Vail, turning in grim triumph to the chief.

“But,” prattled on the serene old lady, “I’m sorry to say I can’t identify it. Because I don’t see it. I’m perfectly familiar with the Argyle watch. But the Argyle watch is most decidedly *not* the turnip-like timepiece our friend Quimby is dangling so seductively before me.”

Thaxton groaned aloud and sank into his chair, his mind awlirl. The chief smiled.

“That seems to settle it,” he said, briskly. “Mr. Vail, you must be mistaken. This cannot be the Argyle watch. Two more-than-reputable witnesses have just testified most definitely to that fact.”

“I don’t know what conspiracy you people are in to save me,” mumbled Vail, glowering from the haggard Clive to the smugly smiling old lady. “But you wouldn’t do it if you didn’t think I am guilty. And that hurts like raw vitriol. I—”

“Don’t be absurd!” chided Miss Gregg. “Don’t lose all the little intelligence the Lord saw fit to sprinkle into that fatuous brain of

yours. I've known you all your life. I know all about you. You'd never receive a Nobel prize for anything except cleanness and squareness and sportsmanship and kindness. But you're no thief. And every one knows it. So stop trying to be pathetic."

"But—"

"Besides," she continued, in the same reproving tone, "nobody but a kleptomaniac ever steals without a practical motive. What motive have you? Why—!"

"Motive?" boomed Joshua Q. Mosely. "Motive, hey? Well, I can't speak for you people's losses, but Mrs. M.'s stolen joolry was worth \$12,000, at a low appraisal. That seems to be motive enough for a poor dub of a country hotelkeeper to—"

"My good, if loud-mouthed, man," replied Miss Gregg, "Mr. Vail's annual income is something in the neighborhood of \$200,000, to my certain knowledge. If he wanted such jewelry as was stolen to-night, he could have bought and paid for a three-ton truckload of it. He could even have paid present-day prices for enough gasoline to run the three-ton truck. What object would he have had in sneaking into our rooms and purloining little handfuls of gew-

gaws? That is one argument which may appeal even to your mighty intellect. He—”

“But,” gurgled Joshua Q. “But—but hold on, ma’am! Is this a funny joke you’re springing? What would a man with a \$200,000 income be doing, running a backwoods tavern like this? Tell me that. There’s a catch in this. Are the lot of you in the plot to—?”

“Miss Gregg is right, sir,” said the chief, who, like the rest of the community, stood in chronic fear of the eccentrically powerful old dame. “And there’s no need to use ugly words like ‘plot,’ when you’re speaking to a lady like her. Mr. Vail’s income is estimated at not less than \$200,000, just as she’s told you. As for his running a tavern or a hotel, he doesn’t. This is his estate, inherited from the late Mr. Osmun Vail. I read in the paper, yesterday, that a clause of the will of Mr. Osmun Vail makes him keep a part of the house open, if necessary, as an inn. Whether or not that’s true, or just a newspaper yarn, I don’t know. But I do know that Mr. Vail could have no financial reason for stealing jewelry or small rolls of bills or cheap watches.”

He spoke with the pride of locality, in impressing an outlander with a neighbor’s impor-

tance. Thaxton Vail, thoroughly uncomfortable, had tried in vain, once or twice, to stem the tide of the chief's eloquence and that of the old lady. Now he sat, silent, eyes down, face red.

Joshua Q. Mosely arose and came closer, staring at the embarrassed youth as if at some new-discovered specimen. His wife fluttered and wiggled, eyeing Vail as she might have eyed a stage hero.

"Well, I'm sure," she said, mincingly, "that puts a new turn on everything. Quite a romantic—"

"Luella," decreed her husband, breathing hard through his nose, "I guess we've made fools of ourselves, horning in here, to-day. Just the same," he went on, scourged by memory of his loss, "that don't clear up who stole our joolry. Nor yet it don't give our joolry back to us. And those two things are more important just now than whether Mr. Vail is a multimillionaire or not."

"Quite so," agreed the chief. "We don't seem to be getting much further in the case. Since Mr. Vail objects to being searched and objects to his guests being searched—well, I have no warrant to search them. But I take it

there's no objection to my searching the house, once more—especially the servants' quarters and all that?"

"None at all," said Vail. "Ring for Horoson. She'll show you around."

"I guess I and Mrs. M. will turn in," said Mosely, "if we're not needed any longer. We're pretty tired, the both of us. Came all the way through from Manchester since sunrise, you know. And we've got to be off first thing in the morning. Chief, I'll stop in at the police station on my way to-morrow and leave our *address* and post a reward. G'night, all."

He and his wife departed to the upper regions, gabbling together in low, excited tones as they went. The housekeeper appeared, in answer to Vail's ring. The chief and the constable strode off in her indignant wake to make their tour of inspection.

"I wish," said Willis Chase, vindictively, "I wish those Mosely persons and that road-company police chief could be made to take turns occupying the magenta room. That's the worst I can wish any one. I—"

"Clive, old chap!" exclaimed Vail, wheeling on Creede as soon as the policemen's footsteps died away. "Why in blazes did you tell such a

thundering lie? And, as for you, Miss Gregg—!”

“Young man,” interrupted the spinster, with great severity, “I knew you when you were in funny kilt skirts and when you wore your hair roached on top and in silly little ringlets at the back, and when you couldn’t spell ‘cat.’ If you think I’m going to tolerate a scolding from you or going to let you call me to account for anything at all you’re greatly mistaken.”

“But—”

“Besides,” she went on, relaxing, “suppose I did tell a lie? For heaven’s sake, what is a lie? That weasel of a Reuben Quimby had no more right to the contents of my brain than to the contents of my safe. A person who is not ashamed to lock a door with a key need not be ashamed to lock his mind with a lie.”

“Aunt Hester!” cried Doris, quite horrified.

“Not that I excuse foolish and unnecessary lies, my dear,” explained her aunt. “They are ill-bred, and they spoil one’s technique for the few really needful lies.”

Then, feeling she had averted for the moment Vail’s angry condemnation of her falsehood, she shifted the subject once more.

“Clive!” she ordained. “Go to bed. You

look like the hero of a Russian problem novel. One of those ghastly faced introspectives with influenza names, who needn't bother to spend money in getting their hair cut; because they are going to commit suicide in another chapter or so anyhow. You look positively dead. This has been too much for you. Go to bed, my dear boy. And thank you for restoring my faith in boykind a few minutes ago by lying so truthfully."

Clive got to his feet, wavering, his face set in a mask of illness. He turned to Thaxton Vail and held out his hand. To Doris there seemed in the action an assurance of loyalty. To Vail the proffer savored of the dramatic—as if, believing his friend guilty, Creede was none the less willing to shake his hand.

"Clive," said Vail, coldly, ignoring the gesture, "if you think I'm a thief I don't want to shake hands with you. If you don't think I'm a thief there's no need in shaking hands in that melodrama fashion. Good night. Need any help to get upstairs?"

"No, thanks," returned Creede, wincing at the rebuff. "I—"

He finished the sentence by toppling over in a dead faint at his host's feet.

Instantly Vail and Chase were working over him, loosening his collar and belt, and lifting his arms on high so that the blood might flow back into the heart. Miss Gregg dived into the recesses of the black bead handbag she always carried on her wrist. From it she exhumed an ounce vial of smelling salts.

“Here!” she said. “Let me put this under his nostrils. It’s as strong as the Moral Law and almost as rank. The poor boy! He—Drat this cork! It’s jammed in. Got a corkscrew?”

Thaxton paused long enough in his work of resuscitation to take from his hip pocket the big German army knife which Clive had brought him from overseas.

“Here!” he said, opening the corkscrew and handing the knife to her.

“What a barbarous contraption!” commented Miss Gregg, as she strove to extract the cork from her smelling-bottle. “How do you happen to be carrying it in your dinner clothes?”

“I stuck it into my pocket, along with my cash, when I changed, I suppose,” said Vail, as he worked. “I was in a rush, and I—”

“That’s a murderous-looking thing on the back of it,” she went on, as she finished drawing

the cork and laid the knife on the table. "It looks like the business-half of a medieval poniard."

"That's a punch, of some sort," he answered absently. "Got the smelling salts ready yet?"

"He's coming around!" announced Chase, as Miss Gregg knelt beside the unconscious man to apply the bottle to his pinched nostrils. "See, his eyes are opening."

Clive Creede blinked, shivered, then stared foolishly about. At sight of the faces bending above him he frowned and essayed weakly to sit up.

"I—surely I wasn't such a baby as to keel over, was—was I?" he panted, thickly.

"Don't try to talk!" begged Doris. "You're all right now. It's been too much for you. Let Thax and Willis help you up to bed. Auntie, don't you think we ought to telephone for Dr. Lawton?"

"No," begged Clive, his voice somewhat less wobbly. "Please don't. A good night's rest will set me up. I'm ashamed to have—"

"Don't waste breath in talking, old man!" put in Vail. "I'm a rotten host, to have let you have all this strain when you were sick. Don't go struggling to get up. Lie still. So!"

Deftly he passed his arms under the prostrate man's knees and shoulders. Then, with a bracing of his muscles, he lifted Clive from the floor.

"Go ahead, and open the door of his bedroom," he bade Chase. "I'll carry him up."

"No!" protested Clive, struggling. "I—"

"Quiet, please," said Vail. "It'll be easy to carry you, but not if you squirm. Gangway!"

CHAPTER X

A CRY IN THE NIGHT

DORIS LANE followed him with her admiring gaze, noting how lightly he bore the invalid and with what tenderness he overrode Creede's petulant remonstrances.

"Yes," said Miss Gregg, as though answering a question voiced by her niece. "Yes, he *is* splendidly strong. And he's gentle, too. A splendid combination—for a husband. I mean, for one's own husband. It is thrown away, in another woman's."

"I don't understand you at all," rebuffed Doris.

"No? Well, who am I, to scold you for denying it, just after my longwinded lecture on the virtues of lying?"

"Auntie," said the girl, speaking in feverish haste in her eagerness to shift the subject, "have you any idea at all who committed the robberies? Have you?"

"Yes," returned the old lady, with no hesitation at all. "I know perfectly well who did it."

"You do!"

"I haven't an atom of doubt. It was Osmun Creede."

"Why, Auntie, it couldn't have been! It *couldn't!*"

"I know that. I know it as well as you. Just the same, I believe he did."

"But he wasn't even here!" urged the girl. "You heard what he said about having dined at the Country Club, and that a dozen people there could prove it."

"Yes," assented Miss Gregg. "I heard him."

"You don't believe him?"

"Yes. I believe him implicitly. For nobody would want to testify in Osmun Creede's behalf who didn't have to. He knows that as well as we do. So if he says a dozen people can prove he was there, he's telling the truth. He'd like nothing better than to bother those people into admitting they saw him there. Especially if they could send him to jail by denying it. Oh, he was there, fast enough, at the Country Club while the rooms here were being looted. I believe that."

"Then how could he have done the robbing?" insisted the girl, sore perplexed.

"I don't know," admitted her aunt. "In fact,

I suppose he couldn't. But I'm equally certain he did."

"But what makes you think so?"

"What makes me *know* so?" amended Miss Gregg. "You're a woman. And yet you ask that! Are you too young to have the womanly vice of intuition—the freak faculty that tells you a thing is true, even when you know it can't be? Osmun Creede stole our jewelry. I know it, for a number of reasons. The first and greatest reason is because I don't like Osmun Creede. The second and next greatest reason is that Osmun Creede doesn't like *me*. A third reason is that there's positively nothing too contemptible for Osmun Creede to do. He cumpers the earth! I do wish some one would put him out of our way. Take my word, he stole—"

"Isn't that rather ridiculous?" gravely asked Doris, from the lofty wisdom of twenty-two years.

"Of course it is. Most real things are. Is it half as ridiculous as for Thaxton Vail to have the stolen Argyle watch in his pocket when it couldn't possibly be there? Is it?"

"I—I can't understand that, myself," confessed Doris. "But—"

"But you know it's somehow all right? Be-

cause you trust Thax. Precisely. Well, I can't understand how Oz Creede could have committed the robberies when he wasn't here. But I know he did. Because I distrust him. If it comes down to logic, mine is as good as yours."

"But," urged Doris, giving up the unequal struggle, "why should he do such a thing? He is well off. He doesn't need the things that were stolen. That was your argument to prove Thax didn't steal them. Besides, with all the horrid things about him, nobody's ever had reason to doubt that Osmun is as honest as the day."

"Honest as the *day!*" scoffed Miss Gregg. "You're like every one else. You get your similes from books written by people who don't know any more than you do. 'Honest as the day?' Do you know that only four days, out of three hundred and sixty-five, are honest? On the four solstices the time of day agrees absolutely with the sun. And on not one other day of them all. Then a day promises to be lovely and fair, and it lures one out into it in clothes that will run and with no umbrella. Up comes a rain, as soon as one is far enough from home to get nicely caught in it. 'Honest as the day!'"

The average day is an unmitigated swindler! Why—”

The return of Vail and Chase from their task of getting Clive to bed interrupted the homily.

“He seems all right now,” reported Willis. “He’s terribly broken up, though, at having fainted. And he’s as ashamed as if he’d been caught stealing pennies from a blind beggar.”

“He needn’t be,” snapped Miss Gregg. “If I’d had to be Oz Creede’s twin brother as long a time as Clive has, I’d be too inured to feel shame for anything short of burning an orphanage. Just the same, he’s a dear boy, Clive is. I like the way he came to the front, this evening, when—”

“We’ve been clear through the house, from cellar to garret,” announced the chief, from the doorway. “And we’ve been all around it from the outside with flashlights. Not a clue.”

“Behold an honest cop!” approved Chase. “One who’ll admit he hasn’t a dozen mysterious clues up his sleeve! It’s a record!”

“I’m going back to the station now,” resumed Quimby, ignoring him, “to write my report. There’s nothing more I can do to-night. I’ll be around, of course, the first thing in the morning. I’ve thrown the fear of the Lord into the whole

staff of servants. They won't dare budge till I get back. No danger of one of them confusing things by leaving on the sly."

Vail followed the two officers to the front door and watched them climb into their rattling car and make off down the drive. As they disappeared, he wished he had asked the chief to leave his man on guard outside the house for the night.

The mystery of the thefts and the evening's later complications had gotten on Vail's nerves. If the supposedly secure rooms could be plundered by a mysterious robber when a score of people were awake, in and around the building, could not the same robber return to complete his work when all the house should be sleeping and unguarded?

Thaxton's worries found themselves centering about Doris Lane. If the intruder should alarm her at dead of night—!

"Mac," he said under his breath to the collie standing at his side on the veranda. "You're going to do real guard duty to-night. I'm going to post you at the foot of the stairs, and there I want you to stay. No comfy snoring on the front door mat this time. You'll lie at the foot of the stairs where you can catch every sound

and where you can block any one who may try to go up or down. Understand that, old boy?"

Macduff did not understand. All he knew was that Vail was talking to him and that some sort of response was in order. Wherefore the collie wagged his plumed tail very emphatically indeed and thrust his cold nose affectionately into Thaxton's cupped hand.

Vail turned back into the house, Macduff at his heels. He locked the front door, preparatory to making a personal inspection of every ground floor door and window. As he entered the front hall he encountered Doris Lane.

The girl had left her aunt in the living room, listening with scant patience to a ramblingly told theory of Chase's as to how best the stolen goods might be traced. Doris had slipped away to bed, leaving them there. She was very tired and her nerves were not at their best. The evening had been an ordeal for her—severe and prolonged.

"Going to turn in?" asked Vail as they met.

"Yes," she made listless reply. "I'm a bit done up. I didn't realize it till a minute ago. Good night."

"Excuse me," he said uncomfortably, "but

have you and Miss Gregg got a gun of any sort with you in your luggage?"

"Why, no," she said. "We don't own such a thing between us. Auntie won't have a pistol in the house. It's a whim of hers."

"So you go unprotected, just for a woman's whim?"

"You don't know Aunt Hester. She is a woman of iron whim," said Doris with tired flippancy. "So we live weaponless. We—"

"Then—just as a favor to a crotchety host whose own nerves are jumpy on your account—won't you take this upstairs with you and keep it handy, alongside your bed? Please do."

He had gone to the Sheraton lowboy which did duty as a hall table. From the bottom of one of its drawers he took a small-caliber revolver.

"I keep this here as a balm to Horoson's feelings," he explained. "Out in the hills, like this, she's always quite certain we'll be attacked some day by brigands or Black Handers or some other equally mythical foes. And it comforts her to know there's a pistol in the hall. Take it, please."

"What nonsense!" she laughed—and there

was a tinge of nerve-fatigue in the laugh. "Of course I shan't take it. Why should I?"

"Just to please *me*, if there's no better reason," he begged.

"I'm afraid you'll have to think up some better reason," she said stubbornly. "I refuse to make myself ludicrous by carrying an arsenal to bed, to please you or any one else, Thax. If you're really timid I suggest you cling to the pistol, yourself."

It was a catty thing to say; and she knew it was, before the words were fairly spoken. But she was weary. And, perversely, she resented and punished her own thrill of happiness that Vail should be so concerned for her safety.

The man flushed. But he set his lips and said nothing. Dropping the pistol back into the open drawer, he prepared to join the two others in the library. But the nerve-exhausted girl was vexed at his failure to resent her slur. And, like an over-tired child, she turned pettish.

"I'm sure you'll be safe," she said, in affected jocosity, "if you'll push your bed and your chiffonier against your door and see that all your bedroom windows are fast locked. Or you might room with Willis Chase. He has plenty of pluck. He'll protect you."

Unexpectedly Vail went up to her and took tight hold of both her hands, resisting her peevish efforts to pull them free.

“Listen to me,” he said in a maddeningly parental fashion. “You’re a naughty and disagreeable and cross little girl, and you ought to have your fingers spatted and be stood in a corner. I’m ashamed of you. Now run off to bed before you say anything else cranky; you—you *bad* kid!”

She fought to jerk her hands away from his exasperatingly paternal hold. In doing so she bruised one of her fingers against the seal ring he wore. The hurt completed the wreck of her self-control which humiliation had undermined.

“Let go of my hands!” she stormed. “You haven’t proved to-night that your own are any too clean.”

On the instant he dropped her fingers as if they were white hot. His face went scarlet, then gray.

“Oh!” she stammered, in belated horror of what she had said. “Oh, I didn’t mean that! Thax, honestly I didn’t! I—”

Miss Gregg and Chase came out into the hall as she was still speaking—as she was still look-

ing appealingly up into the hurt face of the man she had affronted so grievously.

“Come, dear!” hailed the old lady. “It’s almost as late as it ever gets to be. Let’s go to bed.”

“Good night,” said Thaxton, stiffly, ignoring Doris’s eyes and setting off on his round of the windows.

Doris lagged a step after her aunt. Willis Chase made as though to speak lightly to her. Then he caught the look on her remorseful face, glanced quickly toward the back of the departing Vail, and, with a hasty good night to her, made his way upstairs. On the landing he turned and called back to Thaxton:

“If I can’t live through the horrors of the magenta room to-night, Thax, I hope they send you to the hoosgow, as contributory cause. Me, I wouldn’t even coop up Oz Creede in a room like that.”

Vail made no reply. Stolidly he continued to lock window after window, Macduff pacing along behind him with an air of much importance. Doris Lane took an impulsive step to follow him. But Chase was still leaning over the banisters, above, chanting his plaint about the magenta room. So she sighed and went up to bed.

Less than five minutes later, when Thaxton returned to the hallway, his guests had all retired. There was an odd air of desolation and gloom about the usually homelike hall. Vail stood there a moment, musing. Then, subconsciously, he noted that the lowboy drawer still stood open. In absentminded fashion he went over to close it.

He paused for a moment or so, with his hand on the open drawer.

“Mac,” he muttered, his other hand on the collie’s head, “she didn’t mean that. She didn’t mean it, Mac. And I’m a fool to let it get past my guard and sting so deep. She was worn out and nervous. We won’t let it hurt us, will we, Mac? Still I wish she’d taken the gun. So far as I know it’s the only real weapon of any kind in the house. And if there’s danger, I wish she had it beside her. I—I wonder if I should carry it upstairs and knock at the door. Perhaps I could coax Miss Gregg to take it, Mac. What do you think?”

Putting his disjointed words into action, Vail fumbled in the drawer for the pistol.

It was not there.

He yanked the drawer wider open and groped among its heterogeneous contents. Then impa-

tiently he began tossing those contents to the floor. A pair of crumpled and stained riding gauntlets, an old silk cap, wadded into a corner, a dog-leash without a snapper, odds and ends of string, a muffler, a pack of dog-eared cards, a broken box of cartridges. But no pistol.

The revolver was gone, unmistakably gone—taken from its hiding place, during the past five minutes.

Thaxton went through his pockets on the bare chance he might have stuck the pistol into one of them, although he remembered with entire clearness that he had dropped it back into the drawer.

Subconsciously, the thought of weapons lingered in his mind. He felt in his hip pocket for the big army knife. It was not there.

Then he remembered the use it had been put to in drawing the cork of the vial of smelling salts. And he went back into the living room, on the chance he might have left the knife lying on floor or table. But he could not find it.

“Mac,” he confided to the collie—for, like many lonely men, he had grown to talk sometimes to his dog as if to a fellow-human—“Mac, all this doesn’t make any kind of a hit with us, does it? Up to to-day this was the dearest old

house on earth. Since this afternoon it's haunted. That gun, for instance! The front door was locked, Mac. Nobody could have come in from the kitchen quarters, for the baize door is bolted. Nobody could have gotten into the house, this past five minutes. And every one in the house except you and me has gone to bed, Mac. Yet some one has frisked my gun out of that drawer. And the big knife seems to have melted, too. What's the answer, Mac?"

Naturally the collie, as usual, did not understand the sense of one word in twenty. Yet the frequent repetitions of his own name made him wag his plumed tail violently. And the subnote of worried unhappiness in Thaxton's voice made him look up in quick solicitude into the man's clouded face. For dogs read the voice as accurately as humans read print.

Thaxton petted the classic head, spoke a pleasant word to the collie and then switched off all the lights except one burner in the front of the hall and a reading lamp in his study across from the dining room. After which he bade Macduff lie down at the foot of the stairs and to remain there.

Up the steps Vail made his way. At his own

room he paused. Then with a half-smile he went along the corridor to a door at the far end of an ell. He knocked lightly at this.

“Come in!” grumbled Willis Chase.

Vail obeyed the summons, entering the stuffy little magenta room with its kitchen smell and its slanting low ceiling pierced by a single tiny window. Chase had thrown off coat and waistcoat and his tight boots. He had thrust his feet luxuriously into a pair of loose tennis shoes he had worn during their muddy tramp that afternoon. He was adding to the room’s breathlessness by smoking a cigarette as he riffled the leaves of a magazine he had taken from his bag.

“What’s up?” he asked as his host came in.

“I think you’ve had a big enough dose of medicine,” said Vail. “You needn’t sleep in this hole of a clothes-closet. Take my bedroom for the night. To-morrow I’ll have Horoson fix a decent room for you. Scratch your night things together. Never mind about moving all your luggage. That can wait till morning.

“I’m to share your room with you, eh?” asked Chase ungratefully. “Thanks, I’ll stay in this dump here. I’d as soon share a bed with a scratching collie pup as with another man. You’d snore and you’d kick about and—”

“Probably I should,” admitted Thaxton. “But I shan’t. Because I shan’t be there. I didn’t ask you to share my room but to take it. I’m bunking in my study for the night.”

“To give me a chance to sleep in a real room? That’s true repentance. I can almost forgive you for the time you’ve made me stay in this magenta chamber of horrors. But just the same I’m not going to turn you out of your own pleasant quarters. I’ll swap, if you like, and let you have this highly desirable magenta room. Then your nose will tell you what we’re going to have for breakfast before the rest of us are awake.”

“I say I’m going to bunk on the leather couch in my study,” insisted Vail. “There are a whole lot of things I don’t like about this evening’s happenings. And I’m going to stand guard—or sleep guard—along with Mac. You know the way to my room. Go over there as soon as you want to. Good night.”

“Hold on!” urged Chase. “Suppose I spell you, on this nocturnal vigil business? We can take turns guarding; if you really think there’s any need. Personally I think it’s a bit like locking the cellar door after the booze is gone. But—”

“No, thanks. No use in both of us losing a full night’s sleep. Take my room, and—”

“Just as you like. I’ve the heart of a lion and the soul of a paladin and the ruthlessness of an income tax man. But all those grand qualities crumple at the chance of getting away from the magenta room for the night. Thanks, a lot. I’d as soon swig homemade hootch as stay a night in this dump. The kind of hootch that people make by recipe and offer to their guests the same evening. They forget rum isn’t built in a day. I—”

“By the way,” interrupted Vail as he started for the door, “you don’t happen to have a pistol, do you?”

Perhaps it was the uncertain light which made him fancy a queer expression flitted swiftly across Willis Chase’s eyes. But, glibly, laughingly, the guest made answer:

“A pistol? Why, of course not! What’d be the sense in packing a gun here in the peaceful Berkshires? Thax, this burglar flurry has made you melodramatic. Good night, old man. Don’t snore too loudly over your sentry duty.”

Vail departed for the study while Chase stuffed an armful of clothes into a handbag and made his way along the dark hall to Thaxton’s

bedroom. At the stair-foot Vail all but stumbled over the collie. Then, refusing the dog's eagerly mute plea to accompany him into the study, he whispered:

“No, no, Mac! Lie down! Stay there on guard! *Stay there!*”

With a grunt of disappointment Macduff slumped down again at the foot of the stairs. Head between white paws, he lay looking wistfully after the departing man.

The night wore on.

Perhaps half an hour before the first dim gray tinged the sentinel black summit of old South Mountain to northwestward, the deathly silence of the sleeping house was broken by a low whistling cry—a sound not loud enough nor long enough to rouse any slumberer—scarce audible to human ears not tensely listening.

Yet to the keen hearing of Macduff as he drowsed at the stairfoot the sound was vividly distinct. The collie reared himself excitedly to his feet. Then, remembering Thaxton Vail's stern command to stay there on guard, the dog hesitated. Mute, statuelike, attentive, he stood, his teeth beginning to glint from up-curling lips, his hackles abristle.

Macduff was listening now, listening with all

that uncanny perception which lurks in the eardrums of a thoroughbred dog. He whined softly under his breath at what he heard. And he trembled to dash in the direction of the sound. But Vail's mandate held him where he was.

Presently a new sense allied itself to his hearing. His miraculously keen nostrils flashed to his brain the presence of an odor which would have been imperceptible to any human but which carried its own unmistakable meaning to the thoroughbred collie.

Perhaps, too, there came to him, as sometimes to dogs, a strange perception that was neither sound nor smell nor sight—something no psychologist has ever explained, but which every close student of dogs can verify.

The trembling changed to a shudder. Up went Macduff's pointed muzzle, skyward. From his shaggy throat issued an unearthly wolf-howl.

Again and again that weird scream rang through the house; banishing sleep and reëchoing in hideous cadences from every nook and corner and rafter. A hundredfold more compelling than any mere fanfare of barking, it shrieked an alarm to every slumbering brain.

In through the open front doorway from the veranda rushed Thaxton Vail.

“Mac!” he cried. “Shut up! What’s the matter?”

For answer the collie danced frantically, peering up the stairway and then beseechingly back at Vail. No dogman could have failed to interpret the plea.

“All right,” vouchsafed Thaxton. “Go!”

Like a furry whirlwind the dog scurried up the stairs into the regions of the house which had been so silent but whence now came the murmur of startledly questioning voices and the slamming of doors.

Forced on by a nameless fear, Vail ran up, three steps at a time, in the dog’s wake. He reached the second floor, just as two or three of his guests, in the sketchiest attire, came stumbling out into the broad upper hall.

At sight of Thaxton on the dim-lit landing they broke into a clamor of questions. For reply Vail pressed the light switch, throwing the black spaces into brilliant illumination. Then his glance fell on Macduff.

The collie had halted his headlong run just outside a door at the head of the hall. At the oaken panels of this he was tearing madly with claws and teeth.

As Vail hurried to him, the dog ceased his

frantic efforts; as though aware that the man could open the door more easily than could he. And again he tossed his muzzle aloft, making the house reverberate to that hideously keening wolf-howl.

The hall was full of jabbering and gesticulating people, clad in night clothes. Vail pushed through them to the door at which Mac had clamored. It was the door of Thaxton's own bedroom. He turned the knob rattlingly. The door was locked. The others crowded close, wildly questioning, getting in one another's way.

Vail stepped back, colliding with Clive Creede and Joshua Q. Mosely. Then, summoning all his strength, he hurled himself at the door. The stout oak and the old-fashioned lock held firm.

Thaxton stepped back again, his muscular body compact. And a second time he crashed his full weight at the panels. Under the catapult impact the lock snapped.

The door burst open, flinging Vail far into the dense blackness. Clive Creede, close behind him, groped for the light switch just inside the threshold and pressed it, flooding the room with light.

There was an instant of blank hush. Then Mrs. Mosely screamed, shrilly, in mortal terror.

CHAPTER XI

WHAT LAY BEYOND THE SMASHED DOOR

DR. EZRA LAWTON had come home an hour earlier from enacting the trying rôle of Stork's Assistant. He had sunk to sleep wearily and embarked at once on a delightful dream of his unanimous election as Chairman of the Massachusetts State Medical Board.

All Aura, apparently, celebrated this dream election. For the three church bells were ringing loudly in honor of it. There were also a few thousand other bells which had been imported from somewhere for the occasion. The result was a continuous loud jangle which was as deafeningly annoying to the happy old doctor as it was gratifying.

Presently annoyance got the better of gratification and he awoke. But even though his beautiful dream had departed the multiple bell-ringing kept noisily on. And with a groan he realized the racket emanated from the telephone at his bedside.

"Well," he snarled, vicious with dead sleepi-

ness, as he lifted the receiver, "what the devil do you want?"

He listened for a second, then said in a far different voice:

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Miss Gregg. I didn't guess it was you. Nothing the matter, I hope?" he added, as though elderly spinsters were in the habit of calling him up at three in the morning when nothing was the matter.

Again, this time much longer, he listened. Then he ejaculated:

"Good Lord! Oh, good *Lord!*"

The genuine horror in his voice waked wide his slumbrous wife. By dint of thirty years as a country doctor's spouse Mrs. Lawton had schooled herself to doze peacefully through the nocturnal telephone ringing and three A. M. smalltalk which fringed her busy husband's career.

Mrs. Lawton sat bolt upright in bed. Her husband was listening once more. Through the dark his wife could hear the scratchedly buzzy tones of Miss Gregg, desiccated and attenuated by reason of the faulty connection. But, try as she would, she could catch no word. At last Lawton spoke again, the hint of horror still in his voice:

“I’ll start over as soon as I can get dressed, Miss Gregg. You’ve notified the police, of course? Huh? Well, do, at once. I’ll be right there.”

He hung up the receiver and floundered out of bed.

“What’s the matter?” cried his wife. “What’s happened? What’s she want you for? What’s that about the police? What’s wrong? Why is she—?”

“Young Willis Chase has been murdered,” replied the doctor, wriggling into his scarce-cooled clothes. Found dead in bed, with a knifeblade sticking into his right carotid.”

“*Oh! OH!*” babbled Mrs. Lawton. “Oh, it isn’t *possible*, Ezra! Who—who did it?”

“The murderer neglected to leave his card,” snapped the doctor. “At least Miss Gregg didn’t mention it. . . . Where in hell’s hot hinges is my other shoe?”

“But what was he doing at Miss Gregg’s? How did it happen? Who—”

“It wasn’t at Miss Gregg’s. It was at Vailholme. Houseparty, I gather. Thax Vail’s dog woke them all up by howling and then ran to Chase’s room. They broke the door in. Chase was lying there stone dead with a knife in his

throat. And—it was that big German army knife Thax showed us one day. Remember it? About a million blades. One of them a sort of three-cornered punch. That was the blade, she says. Stuck full length in the throat. They're all upside down there. It seems she had presence of mind enough to send for me but not enough to send for the police."

"Oh, the poor, *poor* boy! I—I never liked him."

"Maybe he killed himself on that account," grumbled her husband, lacing his second shoe and rising puffingly from the task. "He—"

"Oh, it was suicide then? The—"

"Nobody seems to know what it was," he rejoined. "I suppose later on I'll have to sit on that question, too, in my capacity of coroner. Good-by. Don't wait breakfast for me."

He was gone. Presently through the open window his wife could hear the throaty wheeze of his car's engine as the self-starter awakened it. Then there was a whirr and a rattle through the stillness, and the car was on its fast flight to Vailholme.

Dr. Lawton found the house glaringly lighted from end to end. The front door stood wide. So did the baize door which led back to the

kitchen quarters. Through the latter issued the gabble and strident terror of mixed voices.

As the doctor came into the lower hall, Thaxton Vail emerged from the living room to meet him. Vail's face was ghastly. Behind him was Miss Gregg.

The others of the party were grouped in unnatural postures in the living room, their chairs huddled close together as though their occupants felt subconscious yearning for mutual protection. Joshua Q. Mosely—mountainous in a yellow dustcoat that swathed his purple silk pajamas—was holding tight to the hand of his sniveling little wife. Doris was crouched low in a corner chair. Beside her sat Clive Creede trying awkwardly to calm the convulsive tremors which now and then shook her.

“Take me up there,” Dr. Lawton bade Vail. “You can tell me about it while I’m—”

He left the sentence unfinished and followed Thaxton up the stairs.

“We had a robbery at dinner time,” explained Vail as they went. “I was afraid the thieves might make a try, later, for more things than they could grab up at first. Foolish idea, I suppose. But anyhow I decided to spend the night downstairs. I let poor Chase have my room.”

Macduff, here, set up a most ungodly racket a few minutes ago. We followed him to my room and broke in. Chase was lying there in bed. You remember that big knife of mine—the one Clive Creede gave me? He had been stabbed with that. He— Here's the room."

As he stood aside for the doctor to pass in, another car rattled up to the porte-cochère.

"Wait a second," said Thaxton. "That may be Quimby. Miss Gregg said she phoned him just after she notified you. He—"

The chief of police bustled into the hallway, and, at Vail's summons, he came lumbering importantly upstairs. Together he and Dr. Lawton entered the deathly still room, Thaxton following.

"We left him as—as he was," explained Vail. "Clive says the law demands that."

Neither of the others paid any heed to him. Both were leaning over the bed. Thaxton stood awkwardly behind them, feeling an alien in his own room. Presently Dr. Lawton spoke almost indignantly.

"I wondered why he should be lying as if he were asleep; with a wound like that," said he. "Except for the look on his face there's no sign of disturbance. I see now."

As he spoke he picked from the floor beside the bed a heavy metal water carafe which belonged on the bedside stand. Its surface was dented far more deeply than so short a tumble warranted.

“Stabbed him,” said the doctor. “Then, as he cried out, stunned him. See, Chief?”

The chief nodded. Then he turned from the bed and swept the room with his beetle-browed gaze. His eyes focused on the nearest window. It stood open, as did all the room’s other windows, on that breathless night.

But its short muslin curtain was thrust aside so far as to be torn slightly from its rod. On the white sill was the distinct mark of a scrape in the paint and a blob of dried mud as from the instep of a boot.

“Got in and out through the window,” decreed Quimby. “In a hurry going out.”

“The door was locked,” put in Vail. “Locked from the inside.”

“H’m!” mused the chief, crossing to the splintered portal. “I see. You folks broke it in, eh? Where’s the key?”

“What key?”

“Key of the door, of course. If Mr. Chase locked himself in he must have done it with a

key. And it isn't likely he took the key out of the lock afterward. Where is it? It isn't in the keyhole."

"The door flew open pretty hard," said Vail. "Perhaps the key was knocked out onto the floor. Shall I look?"

"Never mind," refused the chief. "It isn't immediate. My men can look for it in the morning. I'm going to seal this room, of course, and keep someone on guard. That knife, now—that ought to be easy to trace. It isn't like any other *I* ever saw. It—"

"You're right," acceded Vail, nettled at his lofty air, "it's quite easy to trace. It's mine."

"Yours?"

The chief fairly spat the word at him. Again the heavy gray brows bent, the eyes mere slits of quizzical light between the puckered lids.

"Yes," said Vail. "I had it out, earlier in the evening. I used it to draw a cork. I didn't put it back in my pocket. I must have left it lying somewhere. I looked afterward but I couldn't find it. Some one must have—"

"You left the knife in this room?"

"No," denied Vail, after a moment's thought. "I couldn't have done that. I didn't come up

here again. No, if I left it anywhere it was downstairs.”

“H’m!” grunted the chief, non-committally.

Irritated afresh by the official’s manner, Thaxton turned to the doctor, who was once more leaving the bedside.

“Dr. Lawton,” he asked, “is there any chance he killed himself?”

“Not the slightest,” replied Lawton with much emphasis. “He was lying on his left side. The point entered the carotid from behind. He could not possibly have struck the blow. And in any event he could not have stunned himself with that metal water bottle afterward. No, there is every proof it was not suicide. The man was murdered.”

“And the murderer escaped through the window,” supplemented the chief. “Also, he entered by the same route. Now, we’ll leave everything as it is, and I’ll take my flashlight and examine the ground just below here.”

But before he left the room he leaned far out of the window looking downward. Vail had no need to follow the chief’s example. He knew the veranda roof was directly outside and that any active man could climb up or down the vine trellis which screened that end of the porch.

He also knew no man could have done so without making enough noise to have attracted Thaxton's notice in the night's stillness before the crime. Nor could any man have walked on the tin veranda-roof, even barefoot, without the crackle and bulge of the tin giving loud notice of his presence. A tin roof cannot be traversed noiselessly, even by a cat, to say nothing of a grown man.

As the three trooped downstairs they found the others assembled in the hall nervously awaiting them.

"Well?" asked Miss Gregg.

"He was murdered!" pronounced the chief, portentously.

"You amaze me," said the old lady. "But then, of course, you have the trained police mentality. By whom?"

"That is what we intend to find out," answered the chief, tartly. "Where's the phone? I want to send for a couple of my men. When I've done that I want to ask a few questions."

"We may as well go back into the living room and sit down," suggested Doris. "It's chilly out here."

But as the rest were following her suggestion she took occasion to slip back into the hall

whither Vail was returning after showing Quimby where to find the telephone.

“Thax!” she whispered hurriedly. “I’m so sorry I was cross! I spoke abominably to you. Won’t you *please* forgive me? You know perfectly well I didn’t mean a word of the nasty things I said.”

“I know,” he said soothingly. “I know. Don’t think any more about it. It’s all right. I—”

“And, Thax,” she went on, thrilling oddly as his hand clasped hers, “I did what you asked me to, after all. I took the pistol upstairs with me. I hid it under the scarf I was carrying, and I smuggled it up there. I wanted you to know—”

“They’ll be here in ten minutes now,” interrupted the chief, returning from the telephone.

He preceded them into the living room. Briefly, at his request, Vail told of the collie’s amazing behavior and of the finding of Chase.

“You say you hadn’t gone to bed?” asked Quimby, when the short recital was ended. “Why not?”

“It is my own house. It had been robbed. I felt responsible. It seemed safer for some one to stay on guard.”

“In case the thief or thieves should return?”

inquired the chief. "If you had any practical experience in such matters, you would know a house which has just been robbed is safer than any other. Thieves don't rob the same house a second time the same night. Police annals show that a house in which a crime has just been committed is immune from an immediate second crime."

"If robbery and murder may both be classified as crimes and not as mere outbursts of playfulness," said Miss Gregg, "that theory has been proven with beautiful definiteness here to-night. So the second crime was probably imaginary or only—"

"I was talking of thefts," said Quimby, glowering sulkily at her.

Then stirred to professional sternness by the hint of ridicule, he turned majestically once more to Vail.

"You were sitting up?" he prompted. "You were guarding your house—or trying to—from a second series of thefts? Is that it?"

Thaxton nodded.

"You are sure you didn't go to sleep all night?"

"I am."

"Be careful, Mr. Vail! Many a man is will-

ing to swear he hasn't slept a wink when really he dozed off without knowing it. That is a common error."

"Common or not, I don't think it is likely I was asleep when Chase was killed. Because I was on my feet and walking."

"So?"

The chief was interested, formidably interested.

"You know then just when Mr. Chase was killed?"

"I know when the dog set up that racket. Presumably that was the time. I know because I had looked at my watch as I left the house, just before. It was five minutes past three when I looked."

Dr. Lawton glanced at his own watch.

"It is seven minutes of four," said he. "My examination proved Mr. Chase cannot have been dead quite an hour. The two times agree."

"You say you left the house," pursued the chief, deaf to this interpolation and bending forward, his eyes gripping Vail. "Why did you leave the house?"

"To make a tour of it," returned Thaxton. "It was the second time since the others went to bed that I had gone out to make the rounds

of the veranda path. The time between, I was sitting in my study except for one trip through the interior of the house at about one o'clock. That time I went from cellar to attic."

"But you had left the house shortly before the approximate time of Mr. Chase's death?" insisted the chief. "You went out through the front door?"

"Yes. I—"

"And came back again through the front door?"

"Of course."

"Shortly *after* the murder?"

"The moment I heard Macduff howl. And I hadn't been outside for more than—"

"We'll come back to that if necessary. At present we have established the fact that you left the house shortly before the killing and that you came in again shortly afterward."

Again Vail nodded, this time a trifle sullenly. Like Miss Gregg, he found the chief's hectoring manner annoyed him. Nor did he care to admit that at the instant of Macduff's howling he had been standing motionless under the window of Doris Lane's room in all but reverent—if absurd—sense of watching over her safety while she slumbered.

CHAPTER XII

WHEREIN CLIVE PLAYS THE FOOL

“MR. VAIL,” spoke up the chief, a new smoothness and consideration in his manner, “it is my duty to mention for the second time this evening that anything you may say is liable to be used against you. I merely speak of it. Now that I’ve done so, if you care to go on answering my questions—”

“Fire away!” said Vail.

“The slayer of Willis Chase,” said the chief portentously “was outside the house. He climbed in by an open window. His deed accomplished, he climbed hastily out again. In other words *he*, too, was outside the house shortly before and shortly after the crime.”

“What do you mean?”

“You say you made the rounds outside the house. You declare you were awake and on guard. Did you not see or hear any one climbing to the veranda roof or walking on it or getting into that open window? From your own statement you could not have been far from that

window, at least once, in circling or starting to circle the house. You could not have avoided seeing or hearing any trespasser on the trellis or on the roof just above you. It is established that you were out there at the time the murder must have been committed.”

“I did not see any one or hear any one out there,” said Vail.

“Yet you admit *you* were there?”

“Yes. And nobody else was. I’d have heard him on the roof. And I’d have heard the vines rustle.”

“I agree with you. You would. Mr. Vail, I have had much respect for you. I had still more for your great-uncle, Mr. Osmun Vail. But I am afraid it will be my painful duty to place you under arrest. Unless we—”

“Reuben Quimby, you old fool!” shrilled Miss Gregg. “Why, this boy is—”

“Now, now!” boomed Joshua Q. Mosely. “Don’t you go calling bad names, ma’am, prematurely. I get the chief’s drift. He’s dead right. The evidence is clear. Don’t you see? Vail here admits he went outside a little before the murder and that he came in again a little after it. He says he wasn’t farther off than the walk that borders the porch. He ad-

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mits he didn't see or hear any one else. That can't mean but just one thing. It means he shinned up those vines and into the window and—and did what he went there to do—and came back in time to run upstairs when the dog waked us. And I heard you tell the doctor on the phone that it was Vail's own knife the murder was done with. There's nothing else to it. He—”

“It's *you* who are the old fool, Mosely, not only the chief!” exclaimed Clive Creede, wrathfully, as the rest sat open-mouthed with dismay at the linking of the chain of seemingly stupid questions. “If you knew Mr. Vail as we know him—as the chief *ought* to know him—you'd know he couldn't do such a thing. He couldn't! Why, what motive could he have? Absolutely none. It needs a terrific motive to make a man commit murder. Juries take that into account.”

“But—”

“Thax had no such motive. I could swear to that. If his butler or any other servant should have overheard and testify to the petty quarrel between him and Chase that I walked in on early in the morning, when I came here, any jury would laugh at such a squabble leading to a crime. I speak of it because the butler was

in the outer hall at the time and may give a wrong impression of the spat; and some shyster lawyer may try to magnify it. It was nothing. Chase wanted to come to board and Vail, for some reason, didn't want him to. At least that is all of the quarrel I heard. But men don't kill each other for puerile causes like that. Any more than for the silly dispute I overheard them having a few days ago at the Hunt Club in Stockbridge when Vail threatened he'd—"

"You idiot!" growled Thaxton. "What are you trying to get at? You've known Chase and me all our lives. You know we were good chums. And you know we were forever bickering, in fun, and having mock disputes and insulting each other; from the time we were kids. So—"

"That's just what I'm saying," urged Clive eagerly. "That's what I'm trying to hammer into the chief's head. You had no real motive, no matter what servants or other people may be dragged forward to testify about hearing spats and squabbles between you. You were his friend. Why, Chief, you're out of your mind when you threaten to arrest him!"

"From all I'm hearing," said the chief grimly, "I figure I'm less and less out of my mind. Mr.

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Vail, do you care to tell the nature of the quarrel between you and the deceased—the one Mr. Creede says he ‘walked in on’?”

“I’ve told you,” interposed Creede vehemently, “and so has he, that it was just a sort of joke. It has no bearing on the case. As Vail says, he and Chase were always at swords’ points—in a friendly way. Besides,” he went on, triumphantly, “I can attest to the truth of at least one important part of what he’s just told you. I can swear to it. He said a few minutes ago that he made a round of the house from top to bottom, about one o’clock. He did. I heard him. I couldn’t get to sleep till nearly two. I heard the stable clock strike one. Then almost right afterward I heard soft steps come upstairs and tiptoe along the hall. I heard them pause at the room next to mine, and I heard a rattle as if the door was being tried. Then the steps passed on to—”

“Sounded as if he tiptoed to the room next to yours and tried the door?” interrupted the chief. “Who was occupying the room next to you?”

Clive’s lips parted for a reply. Then, as his eyes suddenly dilated his mouth clamped.

“Who was occupying that room?” repeated

Quimby in augmented interest. "The room he stopped at and whose door he tried."

"I—I don't know," stammered Clive. "And it's of no importance anyhow. I mentioned it to prove Vail could be corroborated in part of his account of how he spent the night, and that if part of his story was true it all was true. He—"

"I don't agree with you that it's 'of no importance,' whose locked door he tried to open," snapped the chief. "It is highly important in every way. If—"

"Then I can clear up the mystery," said Vail wearily. "My own bedroom is next to Creede's. That is the room in which Chase was sleeping."

"Ah! Then—"

"Only," pursued Vail, "my loyal friend here is mistaken in saying I tried the door. I didn't try that or any other door."

"I never said you did, Thax!" protested Clive eagerly. "I said I heard a rattle, as if a door was being tried. It may have been a door somewhere rattling in the wind, or it may have been—"

"On a windless night?" cut in the chief. "Or did the killer of Willis Chase try first to get into his room by way of the door and then, finding

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that locked, enter the room later by the open window? In that case—”

“*Shame!*”

“It was Doris Lane who broke in furiously upon the chief’s deductions.

“Oh, it is *shameful!*” she hurried on, her eyes ablaze, her slender body tense. “You are trying to weave a filthy net around him! And this poor sick blundering friend of his is inadvertently helping you! Thaxton Vail could no more have done a thing like that than—than—”

Choking, she glanced at her aunt for reënforcement. To her astonishment old Miss Gregg had lost her momentary excitement and was sitting unruffled, hands in lap, a peaceful half-smile on her shrewd face. Apparently she was deriving much pleasing interest from the scene.

“But, Chief!” stammered the luckless Clive, looking miserably at Vail. “I can’t even be sure it was Thax whose steps I heard up there. It may have been any one else’s. I only spoke of it to corroborate him. Oh, why didn’t Chase stay in the magenta room? There’s no way of climbing into that from the ground. If only Thax hadn’t made him change rooms—”

“*Will* you be quiet?” stormed Doris, aflame with indignation. “Isn’t he suffering enough

from these senseless questions; without your making it worse?"

"Hush, Doris, dear!" soothed Miss Gregg. "Don't interfere. I'm sure Reuben Quimby is doing very well indeed—for Reuben Quimby. His questions aren't stupid either. A few of them have been almost intelligent."

"Thanks, dear little girl," whispered Vail, leaving his seat of inquisition and bending above the tremblingly angry Doris. "It's *fine* of you. But you mustn't let yourself get wrought up or unhappy on my account. I—"

"There's something else, Chief," boomed Joshua Q. Mosely, "something that maybe'll have a bearing on this, in the way of character testimony. I can swear to the prisoner's homicidal temper. See this swelling on my chin? He knocked me down early in the evening. Mrs. M. and all these others can testify to that. The prisoner—"

"There is no 'prisoner,' Mr. Mosely," gravely corrected the chief. "No arrest has actually been made—yet. But in view of the circumstantial testimony, Mr. Vail," he proceeded, rising and advancing on the unflinching Thaxton, "in view of the testimony, I fear it is my very painful duty to—"

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“To stop making a noise like Rhadamanthus,” interpolated Miss Gregg, “and sit down and listen for a minute to the first gleam of sane common sense that has filtered into this mess. Thax, is the old Elzevir Bible still on its lectern in the study?”

“Why — yes,” answered Vail, puzzled. “But—”

“You remember it, don’t you, Doctor?” she asked, as she wheeled suddenly on the gaping physician.

“The Elzevir Bible?” repeated Dr. Lawton, coming garrulously out of the daze into which an unduly swift and unforeseen sequence of events is won’t to plunge the old. “Why shouldn’t I remember it? It was Osmun Vail’s dearest possession. He paid a fortune for it. I remember how you used to scold him for putting it on a lectern in his study instead of locking it up. And I remember the day you insisted on protecting it with that ugly gray cloth cover because you said the damp was getting into the precious old leather. If Oz Vail had cared less for you or been less afraid of you he’d never have allowed such a sacrilege. But what’s that got to do with—”

She had not waited to hear him out, but had

left the room. The chief fidgeted annoyedly. The others looked blank. As Quimby cleared his throat noisily, as if to speak, the little old lady returned. Reverently between her veined hands she bore a large volume neatly covered with a sleazy dark gray muslin binding.

“Do you recognize it, Doctor?” she asked.

“Yes, yes, of course,” said Lawton, impatiently. “But at a time like this, surely—”

He paused. For she was paying no attention to his protest. Advancing to the table, Miss Gregg laid the Book reverently upon it. Then she placed both hands on its cover.

“Chief,” she said with a queer solemnity in her imperious voice, “I have something to say. On the chance you may not otherwise believe me, I am attesting to my statement’s truth on this Book of Books. Will you hear me?”

“Why—why, of course, Miss Gregg!” exclaimed the chief. “But you are not called upon to take oath. This is not a courtroom, nor am I a magistrate. Besides, your unsupported word—”

“I prefer to make my statement with my hands upon this Book,” she insisted, “in order that there can be no question, now or later, as to my veracity. I hoped I might be able to

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avoid making the statement at all. It is not a pleasant confession to make, and it may hold me up to ridicule or to possible misconception. But I have no right to consider my own wishes when a net of silly circumstantial evidence is closing around an innocent man. You will hear me out?"

"Certainly, ma'am. But perhaps later it might—"

"Not later," she refused, with a brief return to the imperiousness which was her birthright. "Here is my story: Last evening after I went to bed I got to thinking over the robberies. And no matter what courses of reasoning I might follow I couldn't make it seem that any one but Thaxton Vail had committed them. So I—"

"Auntie!" cried Doris, in keen distress.

Vail's face flushed. He looked with pitiful dismay at his old friend. But Miss Gregg went on without glancing at either of the two young people:

"I deduced that he might be sitting up examining his plunder or might even be planning to steal more while the rest of us were asleep. By the time the stable clock struck one I couldn't lie there inactive any longer. I got up and put on this dressing gown and slippers.

That is how I chanced to have them on when the alarm was given. Doris was sound asleep. I crept out of our suite without waking her. She was asleep; as I said. I could hear her. That is one of the joys of being young. Young folks' consciences are so tough from many sins that they sleep like babes."

She caught herself up in this philosophical digression. Then, clasping the Book a little tighter, she continued:

"I tiptoed out into the passageway. There was a faint light in the lower hall. I looked down. Macduff was lying at the foot of the stairs. I think he heard me, for he lifted his head from between his paws and wagged his tail. Then I peered over the banisters. And I saw Thax sitting at his study table. He was dressed—as he is now. The coast was clear for a peep into his room in case he had left any of the stolen things lying around there. So I tiptoed to his door and tried it. It was locked. Of course," she added primly, "I didn't dream Willis Chase was in there. Yes, I tiptoed to his room and tried the knob. That was the rattling sound Clive Creede heard just after the stable clock struck."

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She glanced sharply at Creede. Clive nodded in wordless gratitude.

“As I was starting back toward my suite,” she went on, “I heard Thax begin to climb the stairs. I crouched back behind the highboy in the upper hall. I didn’t care to be seen at that time of night rambling around my host’s house in such costume—or lack of costume. (It was not coyness, understand. It was fear of ridicule. Coyness, in a woman of my age, is like a scarecrow left in a field after the crop is gathered.)”

“Auntie!” protested Doris again, but Miss Gregg went on unchecked:

“Well, there I hid while he went past me, near enough for me to have stuck a pin in him. And, by the way, he did *not* try the knob of the room where Willis Chase was. He didn’t try any doors at all. He just groped along till he came to the third story stairs. Then he went up them.”

There was a slight general rustle at this announcement. Miss Gregg resumed:

“I wondered what he had been doing in his study alone at one o’clock. I wondered if he was looking over the loot there. I couldn’t resist the temptation to find out. (You know,

Chief, I believe that Providence sends us our temptations in order that we may yield to them gracefully. If we resist them, the time will come when Providence will rebuke our stubbornness by sending us no more temptations. And a temptationless old age is a hideous thing to look forward to. But that is beside the point. Excuse me for moralizing. The idea just occurred to me, and it seemed too good to keep to myself.) Let me see—where was I?”

“You said you were tempted to go down to the study while Mr. Vail was in the third story,” prompted Quimby. “To see if you could find—”

“Oh, yes,” she recalled herself. “Quite so. I was tempted. That means I yielded. I scuttled down there as fast and as quietly as I could. I almost fell over the dratted dog at the bottom of the stairs. I got to the study at last. But I barely had time to inspect the desk top and one or two drawers—no sign of the plunder in any of them—when I heard Thax Vail coming downstairs. There was no chance to run back to my room. So I—I— In short, I so far lost the stately dignity which I like to believe has always been mine, as to—in fact, to dodge down behind the desk—in the narrow space between it and the

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wall. By the way, Thax, you must—you simply *must*—tell Horoson to see the maids sweep more carefully in that cranny. I was deathly afraid the dust would make me sneeze. It was shamefully thick.”

“Well, ma’am?” again prompted Quimby.

“Excuse me, Chief. I am a housewife myself. (That’s the only kind of wife I or any one else ever cared for me to be, by the way.) Well, there I hid. Thax came into the study. And as he wouldn’t go out of it I had to sit there on the floor. I suppose it was only for a couple of hours at most, though I could have sworn it was at least nine Arctic winters. All of me went to sleep except my brain. My legs were dead except when they took turns at pringling. So was my back till I got a crick in it. And the dust—”

“While you were there,” asked the chief, “did Mr. Vail leave the room?”

“If he had,” she retorted, in fierce contempt, “do you suppose I’d have kept on sitting there in anguish, man? No, the inconsiderate ruffian stayed. He didn’t even have the decency to go to sleep so I could escape. I heard the stable clock strike two, and then, several months later, I hear it strike three. (Oh, I forgot! My hands are on the Book. It struck three an hour

later. Not several months later.) Then, just after it struck three that wretched man got up and stretched and went out.”

“Yes?”

“He walked to the front door and opened it. By that time I was on my feet. Both of them were asleep—both my feet, I mean—and I had to stamp them awake. It took me perhaps five seconds, and it hurt like the very mischief. Then I was for creeping up to bed. But as I saw the open front door I was tempted again. I thought perhaps he had had some signal from an accomplice outside—a signal I hadn’t heard. I went toward the door. And at that instant the collie here set up the most awful yowling. I bolted past him up the stairs. As I got to the top I looked back. Macduff was still yowling. And Thax Vail came running into the house to see what ailed the cur.”

“Then—”

“What I am getting at is that Thax was not out of my sight for more than thirty seconds in all—thirty seconds at the very *most*,” she concluded. “And I leave it to your own common sense if he could have climbed to the window of his room in that time, found and killed Willis Chase in the dark (he carried no flashlight—I

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saw that through the knee-hole of the desk as he went out), climbed down again and gotten into the house—all inside of thirty seconds. He couldn't. And you know he couldn't."

CHAPTER XIII

HOW ONE OATH WAS TAKEN

SHE glared defiance at the chief, then, in placid triumph, let her eyes roam the circle of faces. The Moselys were wide-eyed with interest. Doris avoided her aunt's searching gaze. Her own eyes were downcast, her face was working. Clive Creede gave a great sigh as of relief. Vail came forward, lifted one of the little old lady's hands from the Book and kissed it. He said nothing. It was the chief who broke the brief silence which followed the testimony.

"You—you are certain, Miss Gregg, that the time Mr. Vail was out of your sight was not longer than thirty seconds?" he asked, troubled.

"I didn't have a stop watch," she retorted tartly. "But the time was just long enough for me to stand up, stamp the pringles out of my joints, go to the front hall, and then to run to the top of one short flight of stairs. In that time if he had committed the murder he must have traversed the whole distance around the veranda walk to a spot below his own room, climbed the vines (making sure not to let them

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rustle loudly), crawl across the roof to the window, wriggle in, locate the bed and the man on it, kill him, and repeat the whole process of getting through the window to the roof and from the roof to the ground and from the ground to the front door. If he could do that in thirty seconds or less he deserves immunity for his speed record.”

“He could not have done it in less than several minutes,” said the chief, consideringly. “And if you were out in the front hall for part of that time you couldn’t have failed to hear the rustle of the vines or the steps on the roof. That would cut the time down to even less than the thirty seconds you speak of. No, he could not have done it.”

“That’s what I told you all along!” chimed in Clive Creede. “And I told you he couldn’t possibly have had any motive. He—”

“Clive!” said Miss Gregg, her voice acid. “Did you ever hear a wise old maxim that runs: ‘Save me from my friends and I’ll save myself from my enemies’? Stop wringing your hands in that silly nervous way and clap both of them tight over your mouth and keep them there. A little more of your staunch friendship and Thax would be on his way to jail. Please—”

“You did not lose sight of Mr. Vail,” summed up the chief with visible reluctance, “from about one o’clock until less than thirty seconds before the alarm was given? You could swear to that if necessary, Miss Gregg?”

“Do you suppose I’ve been keeping my palms on this scratchy old muslin just for fun?” she snapped.

“Oh, yes, I remember!” Quimby corrected himself in some confusion. “I forgot you have already sworn—that you made your statement with your hands resting on the Holy Bible. In that event, Mr. Vail, I can only apologize for my hint at arresting you. I see no evidence at present to hold you or any one else on. Miss Gregg’s word—to say nothing of her solemn oath—would convince any jury in this county and would clear you. Doctor, you will be ready to testify at the inquest that Mr. Chase had been dead less than one hour when you examined him?”

“I shall,” replied Lawton, unhesitatingly.

“One question more, Mr. Vail, if you will permit,” said the chief, with marked increase of deference, as he turned again to Thaxton. “Or, rather, two questions. In the first place, what

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was the cause and the nature of your quarrel with Mr. Chase—the quarrel which Mr. Creede says he interrupted this morning?”

“Mr. Creede has told you all there is to tell about that,” answered Thaxton, with some coldness of tone and manner. “Mr. Chase had read in the paper that I was obliged to maintain Vailholme as a hotel. He insisted on coming here. Not as a guest but to board. He thought it was a great joke. I did not. That is where we differed. There was no quarrel as he and I understood it. Nothing but an exchange of friendly abuse. It remained for Mr. Creede to construe it into a quarrel.”

“I see,” said the chief, doubtfully. “The second and last question is: Why did you, late in the evening, insist on transferring Mr. Chase from the room assigned to him to your own room?”

“Because the night was hot, and his room was uncomfortable and mine was cool and comfortable, and I was not going to occupy my own room all night.”

“H’m!” murmured Quimby.

The tramp of feet in the front hall put an end to any further queries he might have been

framing. Whitcomb and two other constables stood in the living room doorway, arriving in answer to the telephone summons.

At once the chief ranged from inquisitor to policeman.

“First of all,” he directed his men, “bring your flashlights, and we’ll examine the ground under that window. Then we’ll climb up, the same way, if we can borrow a ladder. The vines may—”

“Flashlight?” repeated Whitcomb. “Why, Chief, it’s broad *daylight!* In another ten minutes the sun’ll be up.”

He went over to the nearest long window and threw open the old-fashioned wooden shutters. Into the room surged the strong dawnlight, paling the electric lamps to a sickly yellow.

In, too, through the window itself as he swung it wide, wafted a breath of sweet summer morning air, heavy of dew-soaked earth and of flowers and vibrant with the matin song of a million birds.

The lightning transition from spectral night to flush daylight came as a shock to the group. It jolted them back to normality. Joshua Q. Mosely was the first to speak.

“Guess we’ll hunt up Pee-air and have him

bring the car around," said he briskly. "I and Mrs. M. did our packing last night. No sense in our sticking here any longer. I'll leave my *address* with you, Chief, and a memo about the reward. Guess we'll move along to Lenox or maybe down to Lee for breakfast. See you before we go, Mr. Vail. So long!"

He followed the chief and his men from the room, Mrs. Mosely in tow. Dr. Lawton drifted aimlessly after Quimby.

The four who remained stood for a moment looking after the receding outlanders. Then Clive turned impulsively, remorsefully, to Vail.

"I'm so sorry old man!" he exclaimed. "So rotten sorry! I never meant—"

"Sorry?" echoed Miss Gregg. "You needn't be. You did your best. It's no fault of yours that Thax isn't to be held for the Grand Jury."

Creede winced as though she had spat in his face. He was ghastly pale, and he slumped rather than stood. He looked desperately ill.

"I was trying to help," he pleaded, his ghastly face working. "Honestly, I was, Thax. I suppose that gas attack at my lab has dulled whatever brains I had. It seemed to me I was backing you up, and then all at once I realized I had said things that might make him think—"

“They made him think, all right,” assented the grim old lady. “And you backed Thax up, too—backed him clear up against the wall. If I hadn’t had the rare good luck to be able to prove he was innocent—”

“Oh, it’s all right, Clive,” said Vail, pitying his friend’s utter demoralization. “You meant all right. I—”

“It’s all wrong,” denied Creede brokenly. “I’ve harmed the best friend I have in the world. The fact that I was trying to help doesn’t make any difference. If you don’t mind, I’ll follow the sweet Moselys’ example—pack up and go home.”

“Nonsense!” scoffed Vail. “No harm’s done. Stay on here. You meant all right—”

“Hell is paved with the skulls of people who ‘meant all right,’” interpolated Miss Gregg, severely. “The vilest insult one rational human can heap upon another is that damning phrase, ‘He meant all right!’ It’s a polite term for ‘mischief maker’ and for ‘hoodoo.’”

Clive turned his hollowly sick eyes on her in hopeless resignation. But the sight did not soften her peppery mood.

“Clive,” she rebuked, “I’ve known you always. I knew your father. I know your

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brother—though I don't mention that when I can help it. All of you have had plenty of faults. But not one of you was ever a fool. You, least of all. The war must have done queer things to your head as well as to your lungs and heart. No normal man, with all the brains you took with you to France, could have come back with so few. It isn't in human nature. There's a catch in this, somewhere."

Creede bowed his head in weary acceptance of her tirade. Then he looked with furtive appeal at Doris. But the girl was again sitting with tight-clenched hands, her eyes downcast, her soft lips twitching. From her averted face he looked to Vail.

"I'm sorry, Thax," he repeated heavily. "And I'm going. I'd rather. It'll be pleasanter all around. If I can bother you to phone for a taxi I'll go up and get my things together."

"No!" urged Thaxton, touched by his chum's misery. "No, no, old man. Don't be so silly. I tell you it's all—"

But Creede had slumped out of the room. Vail followed at his heels, still protesting noisily against the invalid's decision.

Miss Gregg watched them go. Then she turned to Doris. There was something defiant,

something almost apprehensive, in the old lady's aspect as she faced her niece.

"Well?" she challenged.

Doris sprang to her feet, her great dark eyes regarding Miss Gregg with fascinated horror.

"Oh, Auntie!" she breathed, accusingly. "*Auntie!*"

"Well," bluffed the old lady with a laudable effort at swagger, "what then?"

"Aunt Hester!" exclaimed the girl. "It was *I* who couldn't sleep a wink last night. Not *you*. I heard the stable clock strike every single hour from twelve to three. And—"

"Well," argued Miss Gregg, "what if you did? It's nothing to boast about, is it? Have you any monopoly on hearing stable clocks strike? Have—?"

"I had, last night," responded the girl, "so far as our suite was concerned. I lay there and listened to you snoring. You went to sleep before you had been in bed ten minutes. And you never stopped snoring one moment till Macduff began to howl so horribly. Then you jumped up and—"

"People always seem to think there's something degrading about a snore," commented Miss Gregg. "Personally, I like to have people

snore. (As long as they do it out of earshot from *me*.) There's something honest and wholesome about snoring. Just as there is in a hearty appetite. I've no patience with finicky eaters and noiseless sleepers. There's something so disgustingly superior about them! Now when *I* eat or sleep—"

"Aunt Hester!" Doris dragged her back from the safety isles of philosophy to the facts of the moment. "You were sound asleep in your own bed all night—till the dog waked us. But you told the chief you didn't sleep at all and you told him that awful rigmarole about hiding behind lowboys and—"

"*Highboys*, dear," corrected the old lady. "Highboys. Or, to be accurate, one highboy and one desk. A highboy and a lowboy are two very different articles of furniture, as you ought to know by this time. Now, that table out in the hall there is a low—"

"You told him all that story," Doris drove on remorselessly, "when not one single syllable of it was true. *Auntie!*"

"My dear," demanded Miss Gregg, evasion falling from her as she came at last to bay, "would you rather have had me tell one small lie or have Thaxton Vail lose one large life? Circum-

stantial evidence—his own knife and his absence from the house at just the critical time and all that—and Clive Creede's rank idiocy in blabbing the very worst things he could have blabbed—all that would have sent Thax to prison without bail to wait his trial. And, ten to one, it would have convicted him. I was thinking of that when my inspiration came. Direct from On High, as I shall always believe. And I spoke up. Then my own niece tries to blame me for saving him! Gratitude is a—”

“But, Auntie!” protested the confused Doris. “Surely you could have told the story without taking oath on it. Perjury is a terrible thing. Even to save a life. Oh, *how* could you?”

“I didn't commit perjury,” stoutly denied Miss Gregg. “I did nothing of the kind. I didn't take any oath at all. Not one.”

“You laid your hands on the Bible,” insisted Doris. “You brought it in from the lectern. And you laid both hands on it when you testified. You said you did it in case your bare word should be doubted. You laid your dear wicked hands on it and—”

“On what?” challenged Miss Gregg, sullenly.

“On the Elzevir Bible,” replied Doris, with

all of youth's intolerance at such infantile dodging.

But to the girl's surprise the old lady glared indignantly at her.

"I did nothing of the sort!" declared Miss Gregg. "Absolutely nothing of the sort. In the first place, I took care not to say I was on oath and not to swear to anything at all. In the second place, the Elzevir Bible is in the bottom drawer of Thax's desk. I know, because I put it there not half an hour ago."

She crossed to the table and snatched up the muslin-swathed book, this time with no reverence at all. Peeling off the sleazy cover, she disclosed the volume itself to the girl's wondering eyes.

It was a bulky copy of Webster's Unabridged Dictionary.

"Auntie!" babbled the astounded Doris.

"I have every respect for Noah Webster," remarked Miss Gregg. "The world owes him a great debt. But I refuse to believe his excellent dictionary was inspired from Heaven or that I committed perjury when I laid my hands on it in endorsement of the story I told."

"*Auntie!* I—"

"And, by the way," pursued the old lady, "I

shall persuade Ezra Lawton to hold the inquest here, and I shall see that this book is placed on the table for the witnesses' oaths to be taken on. Personally, I shall tell him I have conscientious objections to swearing, and when I testify I shall merely 'affirm' (that is permissible in law, you know) with my saintly hands resting on this equally saintly tome."

She ceased and glared once more at her marveling niece, this time with an unbearable air of virtue. Doris returned the look for a second. Then, racked by a spasm of mingled tears and laughter, she caught the little old woman tight in her strong young arms.

"*Oh!*" she gasped between laughing and weeping. "How I pity poor Saint Peter when you get to the Pearly Gates! Five minutes after he refuses to let you in you'll make a triumphant entrance, carrying along his bunch of keys and his halo! But it was glorious in you to save Thax that way. You're *wonderful!* And—and it was all a—a fib about your thinking he had stolen those things? Please say it was! *Please do!*"

"My dear," Miss Gregg instructed her, "if I had said I lay awake through utter faith in the boy it wouldn't have carried half the weight as

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if I made them think I started out on my vigil with a belief in his guilt. Can't you see that? Of course, he never stole those things. I made that quite clear to you last evening, didn't I?"

"And—and, Auntie—you—you KNOW he's innocent of—of this other awful charge, don't you? *Say you do!*"

"The ~~worst~~ affront that can be offered is an affront to the intelligence," Miss Gregg informed her. "Which means your question is a black insult to me. I didn't grip his hand as Clive did, or shout 'Shame!' as you did when he was accused. None of those 'Hands-Across-the-Sea' demonstrations were needed to show my faith in him. My faith isn't only in the man himself, but in his sanity. Whatever else Thax Vail is he's not a born fool. Not brilliant. But assuredly not a fool. He wouldn't kill young Chase or any one else—with a knife that every one would recognize at once as Thax's own—and then go away, leaving it in the wound for the police to find. No, Thax didn't kill Chase. But some one who hates Thax did."

"What—"

"Why else should he do it with that knife? There must have been plenty of more suitable weapons at hand—unless he has killed so many

people this week that all his own weapons are in the wash.”

“But who—?”

“He must have picked up the knife here,” insisted Miss Gregg, “after I used it for a corkscrew—either right afterward or else finding it here in the night after we’d all gone to bed. These windows with their backnumber clasps are ridiculously easy to open from outside. And from where Thax sat or lay in the study the sound of any one entering this room carefully couldn’t have been heard. Whoever came in to kill Willis Chase must have planned to do it with some other weapon—some weapon he brought along to do it with. Then he saw the knife, and he knew it would switch suspicion to Thax. So he used that.”

“But the windows here were still fastened from inside, just now,” argued Doris. “Besides, it’s proved the murderer got in through a window upstairs. He couldn’t have come in through these windows and gotten the knife and then have gone out again and closed and locked them from the inside. He couldn’t. And Thax was the last person downstairs here last night. So nobody from *inside* the house, either, could have gotten down here and stolen the knife and

gone upstairs with it again. The study door is right at the foot of the stairs. Thax couldn't have helped seeing and hearing him, even if he'd been able to step twice over Macduff without disturbing the dog. No, it couldn't be."

"You are quite right," agreed Miss Gregg. "It couldn't. Lots of things in this mystery-drama world *can't* be. But most of them *are*. Which reminds me I must wake Horoson and have her get some coffee made. We'll all be the better for breakfast."

She bustled to the hall as she spoke. Thaxton Vail was standing in the front doorway looking disconsolately out into the sunrise.

"He went," reported Vail, turning back into the house as Miss Gregg and Doris emerged into the hallway. "I'm sorry. For he isn't fit to. He's still all in."

"Who?" asked Doris, her mind still adaze.

"Clive Creede. This thing has cut him up fearfully. He talked a lot of rot about having injured me and not having the courage to face me again. I told him it was absurd. But he went. He wouldn't even wait for a taxi. Just went afoot, leaving his luggage to be sent for. Poor chap!"

Miss Gregg passed on into the kitchen regions.

The police, their inspection of the house's exterior completed, were trooping ponderously upstairs, Lawton still trailing along dully in their wake. Doris and Vail stood alone in the glory of sunrise that flooded the wide old hall.

For another few moments neither of them spoke again, but stood there side by side looking out on the fire-red eastern sky and at the marvel of sunrise on trees and lawn. Unconsciously their hands had met and were close clasped. It was Doris who spoke at last.

"It was splendid of you," she said, "not to be angry with Clive for his awful blunders. I—somehow I feel as if I never want to set eyes on him again. My father used to say: 'I can endure a criminal, but I hate a fool.' I thought it was a brutally cynical thing to say. But now—well, I can understand what Dad meant."

"You mustn't blame old Clive!" begged Vail. "He's sick and upset and hardly knows what he's saying or doing. He thought I was in trouble. And he came to my defense. If he did it bunglingly his muddled brain and not his heart went back on him. I'm sorry Miss Gregg spoke to him as she did. It cut him up fearfully."

"Dear little Aunt Hester!" sighed Doris. "She knew us all when we were babies. And

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she can't get over the notion we're still five years old and that we must be scolded when we're bad or when we blunder. She's—she's a darling!"

"I ought to think so if any one does," assented Vail. "If it hadn't been for her testimony I'd be on my way to jail before now. But to think of her having to sit behind my desk all those hours! It was an outrage! The dear old soul!"

Doris reddened, made as though to enlighten him, then shut her lips in a very definite line. Knowing the man as she did, she believed he was quite capable of refusing to profit by Miss Gregg's subterfuge, and that he would announce at the inquest that the old lady had sacrificed the truth in a splendid effort to save him. Wherefore, being a wise girl, Doris held her peace.

"In books," said Vail, presently, "the falsely suspected hero thanks the heroine eloquently for her trust in him. I'm not going to thank you, Doris. But I think you know what your glorious trust means to me."

She looked down; under the strange light in his eyes. And in doing so she realized her hand was still interclasped with his. She made a con-

scientific effort to withdraw it. But the last few hours apparently had sapped her athletic young strength. For she lacked the muscular power to resist his tender grasp. That grasp grew tighter as he said, hurriedly, incoherently:

“When I get out of this tangle—and I’m not going to let you be mixed up in it with me—there are all sorts of things I’m going to say to you, whether I have the right to or not. Till then—”

He checked himself, his ardent words ending in a growl of disgust. Up the driveway toward the house was striding Osmun Creede.

CHAPTER XIV

A CLUELESS CLUE

CREEDE had changed his dark habiliments of the preceding night for a suit of flannels. His sagging shoulder and slight limp were accentuated by the outdoor garb. Doris drew back from the doorway at sight of him. But Vail stood where he was.

“I met Clive down the road,” began Osmun, with no salutation, as he mounted the veranda steps. “I was driving here to see him—to try once more to persuade him to come to Canobie with me. I made him drive on home in my run-about—he wouldn’t come back here with me—while I stopped to get his luggage. May I trouble you to have it brought down?”

He spoke with studied formality, his rasping voice icy and aloof.

“The servants aren’t up yet,” said Vail, no more warmly. “If you’ll wait here a minute I’ll go and get it for you myself.”

He did not ask Osmun to enter, nor did Creede make any move to do so.

As Vail retired into the house on his quest, Osmun's blinking eyes, behind their thick spectacles, caught sight of Doris Lane just within the shadow of the hall.

"Doris," he said quickly, "if you and Miss Gregg want to get away I can have a car of mine here inside of twenty minutes. And if you and she will stay on at Canobie till Stormcrest is ready for you to go back to it I'll be happier than I can say."

"Thank you," she made cold answer. "But we are very comfortable here. We—"

"Here?" echoed Creede. "But, dear girl, you can't possibly stay on, either of you, after what's happened. Clive told me about it just now. It's unbelievable! And I know how eager you both must be to get away."

"You are entirely mistaken," she returned. "Why should we go away? Of course, poor Willis Chase's death is an awful shock. But he was never a very dear friend to any of us, long as we'd all known him. And Aunt Hester has decided that as soon as the inquest is over, we can settle down to life here as well as anywhere until Stormcrest is—"

"I wasn't thinking of the associations that must hang over this house," explained Creede.

“I suppose Chase’s body will be taken away directly after the inquest. I was thinking of the man who is your host. Clive has just left me in a huff because I told him I believed Thaxton Vail is the only person with the motive or the opportunity for killing Chase. It is true. A thousand things point to it.”

“I am afraid nobody whose opinion is worth while will agree with you,” she answered. “I don’t care to discuss it, please. You’ll excuse me, won’t you, if I go in? I must find Aunt Hester and—”

She finished the sentence by turning on her heel and disappearing down the dusky hall. Halfway in her retreat, she passed Quimby and Dr. Lawton and two of the three constables coming down from their examination of the upper rooms.

“Anything new, Doctor?” she asked Lawton, detaining him as the three others continued their progress to the front door.

The doctor waited until the trio passed out of earshot. Then, lowering his voice, he said quizzically:

“The chief’s got another bee in his bonnet now. He’s all up in the air over it. He says it lands the case against a blank wall.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, puzzled at his hint.

“Why,” said the doctor, as if ashamed to mention so fantastic a thing, “you know there was a shoe mark on the window-sill and a scrap of mud where the killer had stepped on the sill on the way out.”

“Or in,” suggested Doris.

“Out,” corrected Lawton.

“How do you know?”

“The chief put his magnifying glass over it in the strong light just now,” said Dr. Lawton. “Then he made us all take a peep. There was a faint outline of the ball of a shoe pressed against the white woodwork of the sill. And the shoe faced outward. That was clear from the curve of its outer edge. It was a left foot at that. A tennis shoe.”

“He wore tennis shoes to muffle the sound of his steps?” cried Doris.

“That’s what I thought first,” answered Lawton. “So did the chief. But we both changed our minds.”

“Why?”

Again the doctor hesitated almost shamefacedly.

“It’s so—so queer,” said he. “I can’t expect

you to believe it. I didn't believe it myself till the chief made me examine the marks under the magnifier and again under his pocket microscope. It was a tennis shoe. Of course Quimby began to ransack Thaxton Vail's boot trees and to compare his soles with the size of this. Well, the sole-mark on the sill was fully two sizes larger than any of Thaxton's soles."

"I don't see anything unbelievable about that," she commented. "It clears Thax all the more completely."

"You're right," said Lawton. "It clears Thax all right as far as it goes. But that isn't the unbelievable part of it. There was a pair of tennis shoes under the edge of the bed. Lying a yard or so apart and in the shadow. We none of us saw them first on account of the light. Not till we had tested all Vail's shoes by that imprint on the sill. Then the chief hit his toe against one of them. He stooped down and hauled them out. They had bits of mud still sticking to their instep. But the left one had much less than the other. They were bigger than any of Vail's shoes. But we didn't notice that till we had tested the left one—the one with the least mud on it—against the sill's imprint. It fitted exactly. It did more. The sole-

grips were new rubber with a funny crisscross pattern. And those grips were precisely the same as the marks on the sill. The microscope proved it. The step on the sill was made by that very shoe. There couldn't be any doubt of it."

"But—"

"Then came the oddest part," continued the doctor. "You've seen Cooley, the night constable? He clerks, part-time, in the new shoe store they've opened this year at Aura. And he grabbed hold of those tennis shoes and gave them one good look. Then he vowed they are a pair his boss had sent for—all the way from New York—to a pedic specialist—for Willis Chase."

"*What?*"

"He said Chase came into the shop last week and told them he had been having trouble with his arches. He'd had the same trouble once before. And that other time he had been recommended to a man in New York who made shoes that helped him very much. He gave them the man's address and had them send for this pair of tennis shoes for him. The shoes came two days ago. The clerks all studied them carefully because the 'last' was so peculiar. Cooley said

he could swear to them. Then he proved it. Just inside the vamp he had scribbled Chase's initials, 'W. A. C.,' in pencil, when they came to the shop. He had done it to make sure they wouldn't get mixed up with the rest of the stock by some green clerk before Chase could call for them. And sure enough there were the initials. The shoes were Chase's. Apparently he had kicked them off under the edge of the bed when he undressed."

The girl was staring at him in frank perplexity.

"But," she argued, "you just said the left shoe of that pair was the same shoe that had made the mark on the white woodwork of the windowsill when the murderer escaped. How could it—"

"That's the part of it none of us can understand. Chase couldn't have killed himself and then walked to the window with his shoes on and stepped on the sill and then come back to bed and taken his shoes off and lain down again. Yet there isn't any other solution. Don't you see how crazily impossible the whole thing is? And the murderer couldn't have been wearing Chase's shoes and then stopped on the other side of the sill and taken them off and tossed

them back under the bed. From the position of the window they couldn't possibly have been thrown from there to the spot where we found them lying."

The girl's puzzled eyes roamed to the veranda. Osmun Creede had halted the chief. Quimby was talking earnestly to him, presumably reciting the impossible tale of this latest development.

Perhaps it may have been the effect of the light, but Doris as she watched half fancied she saw Osmun's lean face grow greenish white and his jaw-muscles twitch convulsively as if in effort to keep steady his expression. But at once the real or fancied look was gone, and he was listening stolidly.

"It must be a cruel blow to him," she mused to herself, "to find still further proof that Thax is innocent. No wonder he seems so stricken!"

Thaxton Vail interrupted her reverie by coming downstairs, carrying Clive's suitcase and a light overcoat and hat. These he bore to the veranda and without a word handed them to Osmun.

Creede took them in equal silence. Then as he turned to depart he favored Vail with an expressionless stare.

“You’ve got more brain—more craft—than I gave you credit for, Thax,” he said abruptly. “They’ll never convict you.”

He descended the steps and made off limpingly down the drive without waiting for further speech.

CHAPTER XV

THE IMPOSSIBLE

THE inquest had come and gone. Its jury of Aura citizens and two summer folk, duly instructed by Lawton as to the form of their verdict, gave opinion that Willis Chase had met his death at the hands of a person or persons unknown, wielding a sharp instrument (to wit, a punch blade of an identified knife) and a blunt instrument (i. e., a similarly identified metal water carafe).

That was all.

Willis Chase's sister and his brother-in-law came over from Great Barrington, where they had an all-year home, and they took charge of the dead man and his effects.

By noon Vailholme had settled to a semblance of its former pleasant calm. Doris and her aunt were the only remaining guests. Thanks to Horoson's genius, enough servants consented to remain at only slightly increased subsidy to keep the household machinery in motion.

The actors and spectators of the preceding night's drama had a strange sense of unreality as of having been part of some impossible nightmare.

Later the numbness would pass and the shock's keener effects would play havoc with nerves and thoughts. But for the moment there was dull calm.

To add to the sense of gloom and of dazed discomfort, the day was the hottest of the year. The thermometer had passed the ninety mark before ten o'clock. By twelve it was hovering around ninety-seven, and not a vestige of breeze mitigated the heat.

Even in the cool old house the occupants sweltered. Outside, ether-waves pulsed above the suffering earth. The scratch of locusts sounded unbearably dry and shrill. The leaves hung lifeless.

The whole landscape shimmered in the murderous heat. South Mountain, standing benevolent guard beyond the Valley, was haze-ribbed and ghostly. The misty green range, to westward, cut by Jacob's ladder, threw off an emerald-and-fire reflection that sickened the eye. The whole lovely mountain region with its sweet valleys swooned depressedly in the awful heat.

Directly after the early lunch at Vailholme, which nobody wanted, Miss Gregg took anxious note of Doris's drooping weariness and ordered her upstairs for a nap. The past twenty hours' events and a sleepless night had taken toll of even the girl's buoyant young strength. Willingly she obeyed the command to rest.

"I'll be along presently," said Miss Gregg, as Doris started upstairs. "First, I want to verify or disprove a boast of my dear old friend, Osmun Vail. Soon after he built this house he told me there was one veranda corner where there was always a breeze even in the stiflingest weather. If I can discover that corner I shall believe in miracles. It will be a real sensation to sit for five minutes in a breeze on a day like this. Come along, Thax, and show me where it is."

Irritated by her ill-timed flippancy, Vail, with some reluctance, left the more comfortable hall to follow her to the porch. Macduff had stretched his furry bulk flat on the hearthstone of the big hall fireplace in the sorry hope of deriving some coolness therefrom. As Vail went out after Miss Gregg the dog sighed loudly in renunciation of comfort, arose, stretched him-

self fore and aft in true collie fashion, and stalked out onto the torrid veranda with the two misguided humans.

For this is the way of a dog. Tired or hungry, he will follow into rain or snow or heat the man he calls master—sacrificing rest and ease and food for the high privilege of being with his god.

Thaxton Vail was not Macduff's god. Vail had had the collie for only a few months. Yet man and dog had become good friends. And, to his breeder, Clive Creede, the collie nowadays gave little more than civility, having apparently forgotten Creede and their early chumship during the twin's absence in France.

Clive had left him at Vailholme. There Vail had found him on his own return from overseas. When Clive came back a little later Macduff accorded him but a tepid welcome. He showed no inclination to return home with his old master, but exhibited a very evident preference for his new abode and his new lord. Wherefore Clive had let him stay where he was.

The heat waves struck through the collie's massive tawny coat now as he followed Vail and Miss Gregg out onto the hot veranda. He

panted noisily and began to search for some nook cooler than the rest of the tiled floor, where he might lay him down for the remainder of his interrupted snooze. Failing to find it, he looked yearningly toward the dim hallway.

“See there!” proclaimed Miss Gregg. “There’s no breezy corner out here to-day. If there was, Macduff would have discovered it. Trust him to pick out comfort wherever it’s to be found! No dog that wasn’t a connoisseur of comfort, would have elected to stay on at Vailholme instead of going back to Rackrent Farm with Clive. And yet one reads of the faithful dogs that prefer to starve and freeze with their loved masters rather than live at ease with any one else! It was a frightful shock to my ideals three months ago when I witnessed the meeting between the new-returned Clive and his canine chum. I had looked forward to a tear-stirring reunion. Why, Mac hardly took the trouble to wag his tail. Yet he and Clive used to be inseparable in the old days. A single year’s absence made the brute forget.”

“Mac, old man,” said Vail, rumpling the colliie’s ears, “she’s denouncing you. And I’m afraid you deserve it. I’ve always read of the loyalty of collies. And it jarred me as much as

it did the rest of them when you passed up Clive for me. Never mind. You're—"

The clank and chug of an automobile interrupted him. Around the driveway curve appeared a rusty and dusty car of ancient vintage. At its wheel was a rusty and dusty man of even more ancient vintage—to wit, Dr. Ezra Lawton.

"Hello!" hailed Thaxton, as the car wheezed to a halt under the porte-cochère. "What brings *you* back so soon? I figured you would be sleeping all day. Anything new?"

"Yes and no," answered Lawton, scrambling up the steps to greet Miss Gregg and his host. "I met Osmun Creede's chauffeur as I was starting out on a call. I asked him how Clive is. He said he didn't know and that Clive must be at Rackrent Farm, for he isn't at Canobie. I got to thinking. And I'm going to take a run over there. He's sick. He isn't fit to be staying all alone or just with his two old negroes at that gas-reeking house. If he won't go to Canobie and if he won't come back here I'm going to kidnap him and make him come home with me till he's more on his feet again."

"Good old Samaritan!" applauded Vail.

"But that isn't why I stopped here on my

way,” pursued Lawton. “I’ve been thinking. You told me Clive brought that German army knife home to you. I’m wondering if he happened to bring home several of them as presents, or if that was the only one. If there are more than one it may throw a light on this muddle to find out who has the other or the others. If there are several and they’re all alike, it may not have been yours that killed Chase.”

“I see,” answered Vail, adding: “No, he didn’t tell me whether that was the only one or not.”

“Well, is there any mark on yours by which you can be sure one of the other knives didn’t kill Chase—if there are any other knives like it?”

“No. I can’t help you out even that far. I’m sorry. By the way, if you don’t mind, Doctor, I’ll go across to Rackrent Farm with you. All morning I’ve been feeling remorseful about letting the poor chap leave here. He’s so sensitive he’ll be brooding over the way he bungled in trying to help me. I’ll go over and see if I can’t make him feel better about it. Perhaps I can make him come back. It’s worth a try anyhow.”

“Come along!” approved the doctor. “Plenty of room. Hop in.”

“I think,” suddenly decided Miss Gregg, “I

think I'll do some hopping, too. I went over the boy roughshod. I was cross and tired. I'll tell him I'm sorry. Besides, there may be a bit of breeze in driving. There's none here."

As Vail helped her into the tonneau Macduff leaped lightly from the veranda steps to the rear seat of the car beside her. The collie, like many of his breed, was crazily fond of motoring and never voluntarily missed a chance for a ride. Vail got into the front seat beside Lawton and the car rattled on its way.

Rackrent Farm lay less than a mile from Vailholme's farther gate. As the car turned into the farmhouse's great neglected front yard and stopped there was no sign of life in or about the unkempt house as it baked in the merciless sunshine. Neither of the old negro servants appeared. Clive did not come to door or window in response to the unwonted arrival of visitors at his hermitage. An almost ominous stillness and vacancy seemed to brood over the whole place.

"I don't like this," commented Lawton worriedly as he drew up at the end of the brick path which traversed the distance from carriage-drive to front door. "And— By the way," he interrupted himself, "now I remember it. Oz

said something about the two negroes being made sick by the gases and clearing out till the house could be aired. Aired! Why every window and every door in sight is shut!”

“Clive must be here all alone if his servants decamped,” said Vail. “Probably he hasn’t the energy to open up the house, sick as he is. Come on!”

He got out with the doctor, turning to help Miss Gregg to alight.

Before she could step to the ground Macduff crowded past her in right unmannerly fashion, leaping to earth and standing there.

The collie’s muscles were taut. His muzzle was pointed skyward. His sensitive nostrils deflated and filled with lightning alternation as he sniffed avidly at the lifeless air. He was in evident and keen excitement, and he whimpered tremulously under his breath.

Paying no heed to the collie, the three humans were starting up the ragged brick walk which wound an eccentric way through breast-high patches of boxwood to the front door of the farmhouse.

The bricks radiated the scorching heat. The boxwood gave back hot fragrance under the sun’s untempered rays. The locusts were shrill-

ing in the dusty tree-branches above. Over everything hung that breath of tense silence.

Macduff, after one more series of experimental sniffs, flashed up the winding walk past the three and toward the front door.

Within six feet of the door he shied like a frightened horse at something which lay in his path. And he crouched back irresolutely on his furry haunches.

At the same moment the trio rounded the curve of path between two high boxwoods which had shut off their view of the bricked space in front of the doorway.

There, sprawling face downward on the red-hot bricks at their feet, lay the body of a man.

Miss Gregg flinched unconsciously and caught hold of Vail's arm. The doctor, his professional instincts aroused, ran forward and knelt at the man's side, turning him over so that the body lay face up beneath the pitiless furnace-heat of the sky.

The dazzling white glare of sunlight poured down upon an upturned dead visage.

"Clive!" panted Miss Gregg, dizzily. "Oh, it's Clive *Creede!*"

"Not a mark on him," mumbled Vail, who had bent beside the doctor over the lifeless body.

“Not a mark. Sunstroke, most likely. In his weakened state, coming out of the house into this inferno of heat— You’re sure he’s dead, Doctor?”

For an instant Lawton did not answer. Then he finished his deftly rapid examination and rose dazedly to his feet.

“Yes,” he said, his face a foolish blank of bewilderment. “Yes. He is dead. But he has been dead less than fifteen minutes. And—it wasn’t sunstroke. He—”

The doctor paused. Then from between his amazement-twisted lips he blurted:

“He froze to death!”

Miss Gregg cried out in unbelieving wonder. Thaxton Vail’s incredulity took a wordier form.

“Froze to death?” he ejaculated, loud in his amaze. “And less than fifteen minutes ago? Doctor, the weather’s turned your head. This is the hottest day of the year. Out here in the sun the mercury must be somewhere around a hundred and twenty. *Froze to death?* Why, it’s im—”

“I tell you,” reiterated Dr. Lawton, mopping the streams of sweat from his forehead, “I tell you HE FROZE TO DEATH!”

CHAPTER XVI

THE COLLIE TESTIFIES

IN the moment of stark dumfounded hush that followed Dr. Lawton's verdict the collie created a diversion on his own account.

For the past few seconds he had stood once more at gaze, muzzle upraised, sniffing the still air. The impulse which had sent him charging toward the house had been deflected at sight of the body on the brick pathway, and he had checked his rush.

Perhaps it was the all-pervasive fragrance of the boxwood bushes on every side, bakingly hot under the sun's glare, that confused the scent he had caught. In any event he was sniffing once more to catch the lost odor which had guided him in his short hurricane flight.

Then he varied this by breaking into a fanfare of discordantly excited barks.

The racket smote on its hearers with a shock of horror. Thaxton Vail caught the dog by the collar, sternly bidding him to be silent. Trembling, straining to break from the grasp, Macduff obeyed the fierce command.

At least he obeyed so far as to cease his clangor of high-pitched barks. But he did not cease for one instant to struggle to liberate himself from the restraining grip.

Furiously his claws dug into the brick-cranies, seeking a foothold whereby he might exert enough leverage to break free. Vail, with another sharp command, dragged him to one side, meaning to tie him by means of a handkerchief to one of the bush stems.

The collie's forefeet clawed wildly in air as they were lifted momentarily off ground. And one of the flying paws brushed sharply across the forehead of the dead man.

There was a cry from Miss Gregg followed by a gasp from both men. The curved claws had chanced to catch in Creede's thick tangle of hair that clung dankly to the forehead.

Under that momentary tug the hair gave way. A mass of it as large as a man's hand came loose with the receding forepaw of the dog. And lo, the dead man's forehead was as bald as a newborn baby's!

The change wrought by the removal of the curling frontal hair made a startling difference in the lifeless face. It was Miss Gregg who exclaimed shudderingly:

“That’s not Clive! That’s—that’s *Osmun Creede!*”

“Good Lord!” babbled the doctor. “You’re—you’re right! It’s Oz!”

Vail, still clutching the frantically struggling collie, stared in silence. It was uncanny—the difference made by that chance removal of the ingenious toupée. Instantly the man on the ground before them lost his resemblance to Clive and became Clive’s twin brother.

Lawton, catching sight of an object which the shift of posture had caused to slide into view in the prostrate man’s upper coat pocket, drew forth a spectacle-case.

In view of the amazing identification the intruders wholly forgot for the moment Dr. Lawton’s ridiculously incredible claim that Creede had frozen to death on the hottest day of the year.

They had even forgotten the heat that poured down upon them in perilous intensity. They forgot everything except this revelation that the supposed Clive Creede, their friend, was Osmun Creede whom they had detested.

Macduff strained and whimpered unheeded as Vail still held him with that subconscious grip on his collar. All three were staring open-

mouthed at the sprawling figure on the bricks. For a space nobody spoke.

Then, with a start, as of one who comes out of a trance, Miss Gregg burst into hysterically rapid speech.

“I knew it all the time!” she volleyed. “I knew it all the time—clear in the back of my head where the true thoughts grow—the thoughts that are so true they don’t dare force themselves to the front of the mind where the everyday thinking is done. I knew it! There were no twins at all. There was only Osmun!”

The two others blinked stupidly at her. She rattled on with growing certainty:

“Osmun was the only one of the Creede twins to come back alive from France. I know it. There *is* no Clive Creede. There never has been since the war. He must have died over there. Stop and think, both of you! Did you ever see the two twins together since Osmun came from overseas? Not once. Did you?”

“Good Lord!” sputtered the doctor. “Of course I have. Often. At—at least, I—I’m sure I must have. I—”

“She is right,” interposed Vail in something like awe, “I swear I believe she is right. I

never stopped to think about it. But I can't remember seeing them together once since—"

"It was Osmun, alone!" declared Miss Gregg. "He played both rôles. Though heaven alone knows why he should have done such a queer thing. And he worked it cleverly. Oh, Oz always had brains! Clive was supposed to live here at Rackrent Farm, while Oz lived at Canobie—those two who had never lived apart before! That was to make the dual rôle possible. He couldn't have pretended they lived in the same house without the servants or some guest discovering there was only one of them. But a couple of miles apart he could divide his time between Rackrent and Canobie in a plausible enough way."

"But—"

"Bald and lame and with a stoop and wearing thick spectacles he was Osmun. Erect and with a mass of hair falling over his forehead and no glasses he was Clive. There was no need to make up the face. They had been twins."

"It's ingenious," babbled Dr. Lawton, fighting for logic and for the commonplace. "But it doesn't make sense. Why, I—"

"It *will* make sense when we get it cleared up!" she promised. "And now that we've got

hold of both ends of the string we'll untangle it in short order. When we do, we'll find who killed Willis Chase and who stole our jewelry. That isn't all we'll discover either. We'll—drat the miserable collie!" she broke off. "Has he gone crazy? Make him be still, Thax!"

For Macduff, failing to get free by struggling and by appealing whimpers, had now renewed his salvo of barking. Vail spoke harshly to the dog, tightening his hold on the collar.

The brief interruption switched the current of Dr. Lawton's thoughts back from this mystery of identity to a more startling and more professionally interesting mystery—to that of a man who had achieved the garishly impossible exploit of freezing to death in a sun-scourged temperature of 120 degrees or more. Again the doctor knelt by the body, swiftly renewing his examination.

But even before he did so he knew he could not have been mistaken in his diagnosis.

Lawton was a Berkshire physician of the old school. He had plied his hallowedly needful profession as country doctor among those tumblers of mountains and valleys for nearly half a century.

Winter and summer he had ridden the rutted

byroads on his errands of healing. Often in olden days and sometimes even now he had been called on to toil over unfortunates who had lost their way in blizzards with the mercury far below zero, and who had frozen to death before help could come. Every phase of freezing to death was professionally familiar to him. The phenomena were few and simple. They could not possibly be mistaken.

And, past all chance of doubt, he knew now that Osmun Creede had frozen to death—that he had died from freezing in spite of the tropical torridity of the day.

The fact that the thermometer was registering above one hundred in the shade and was many degrees higher here in the unchecked sun-glare—this did not alter the far more tremendous fact that Osmun Creede had just died from freezing.

Lawton raised the rigidly frozen body in order to slip off from it the coat which impeded his work of inspection. Deftly he pulled the coat from the shoulders, the sleeves turning inside out in the process, and he tossed it aside.

The flung coat landed on a twig-tangle of the nearest box-bush, hanging upside down from the twigs. From its inner pocket, thus reversed,

fell a fat wallet. It flapped wide open to the bricks, the jar of contact shaking from its compartments three or four objects which glittered like colored fire as they caught and cast back a million sun-rays.

Miss Gregg swooped down on the nearest of these glowing bits, retrieving it and holding it triumphantly out to Thaxton.

“Doris’s marquise ring!” she announced. “And there’s my pearl-and-onyx brooch down there by your left toe. I said last night Oz Creede was the thief. I knew he couldn’t possibly be. But that made me know all the more he was.”

She stooped to gather up other items of the scattered loot. Vail bent down to help her. In doing so, instinctively, he slackened his hold on Macduff’s collar.

The dog took instant advantage of the chance to escape. Never pausing, he flashed toward the shut front door of the farmhouse. No time or need now to bark or to struggle. He was free—free to follow up the marvelous news that his sense of smell had imparted to him.

Like a whirlwind he sprang up the hot brick walk to the closed door.

“What on earth—?” began Miss Gregg, looking vexedly from her task of jewel-collecting as the flying collie sped past her.

Then the half-uttered question died on her lips.

For as Macduff cleared the wide flagstone in front of the threshold the farmhouse door swung open from within.

In the doorway stood—or rather swayed—a man.

The man was Clive Creede.

The three intruders gaped in dazed unbelief at him. Vail and Miss Gregg were too stupefied to rise from the ground, but continued to crouch there, the recovered plunder in their stiffening fingers.

Lawton blinked idiotically across the body of Osmun, his old face slack with crass incredulity.

Yes, there in the threshold swayed Clive Creede. He was thin to emaciation, his hair was gray at the temples, and his face was grayer. He seemed about to topple forward from sheer weakness. His hollow eyes surveyed the group almost unseeingly. The man looked ten years older than did his dead brother.

With a scream of agonized rapture—a scream all but human in its stark intensity—the collie hurled himself upon his long-absent master.

Leaping high, he sought to lick the haggard face. His white forepaws beat an ecstatic tattoo on Clive's chest. Dropping to earth, he swirled around Creede in whirlwind circles stomach to the ground, wakening the hot echoes with frantic yelps and shrieks of delight.

Then, sinking down at Clive's feet, he licked the man's dusty boots and gazed up into his face in blissful adoration. The dog was shaking as with ague.

After two years' absence his god had come back to him. He had caught Clive's scent—blurredly and uncertainly—through the sharp fragrance of the boxwood and the stillness of the air—as far off as the gateway. Every inch of the houseward journey had confirmed more and more his recognition of it.

Then, just as he located the scent and sprang forward to find the unseen master, Thaxton Vail had collared him and checked his quest.

But now he had come again to the feet of the man he worshiped. Henceforth Thaxton and all the rest of the world would be as nothing to the dog. He had re-found his god—the god for

whom he had grieved these two dreary years—the god who most assuredly was not the “Clive Creede” that had imposed himself upon these mere humans.

Lifting his head timidly, yearningly, Macduff stood up once more. Rearing himself, he placed his forepaws again on Clive’s chest and peered up into the man’s face. The collie was sobbing in pure happiness, sobbing in a strangely human fashion. His god had been brought back to him.

Clive laid two thin and trembling hands on the silken head.

“Mac!” he murmured huskily. “*Mac*, old friend!”

At sound of the dear voice the collie proceeded once more to go insane. Capering, dancing, thundrously barking, he circled deliriously about his master.

But Clive was no longer heeding him. His hollow gaze rested now on the three humans who were clustered about his dead brother—the three who still eyed him in vacant disbelief.

From them his glance strayed to Osmun Creede. And again Clive’s white lips parted.

“He’s dead,” he croaked. “He’s—he’s—frozen—frozen to death. I—”

He got no further. Attempting to take a forward step, he reeled drunkenly. As he pitched earthward Thaxton Vail sprang toward him, catching the inert body in his arms as it fell.

CHAPTER XVII

UNTANGLING THE SNARL

TWO days later, at Vailholme, Dr. Lawton stumped downstairs to the study where Thaxton and Doris and Miss Gregg awaited him. Miss Gregg, by the way, chanced to be in an incredibly bad humor from indigestion. Every one knew it.

Thrice a day had the doctor come to Vailholme since he and Thaxton had borne the unconscious Clive thither from Rackrent Farm. A nurse had been summoned, and for forty-eight hours she and Lawton had wrought over the senseless man.

This morning Clive had awakened. But, by the nurse's stern orders, he had not been allowed to talk or even to see his housemates until the doctor should arrive.

For an hour Lawton had been closeted with the invalid. The others greeted his descent from the sick room in eager excitement.

"Well? Well? How is he?" demanded Miss Gregg with the imperious note Lawton detested,

firing her queries before the doctor was fairly in the study. "Is he sane? Did he know you? Speak up, man!"

"Sane?" echoed the doctor a bit testily. "Of course he's sane. Why shouldn't he be? He always was, even in the old days. And why shouldn't he remember me? Didn't I bring him into the world? And haven't I just brought him back into it?"

"Ezra Lawton!" snapped the old lady, indignant at his tone. "You must have been born boorish and exasperating. Nobody could have acquired so much boorishness and crankiness in seventy short years. You're—"

"Auntie!" begged Doris. "*Please!* Doctor, we've been waiting so anxiously! Won't you tell us all about him? We—"

Dr. Lawton thawed at her pleading voice and look.

"The nurse tells me he came out of the coma clear-headed and apparently quite himself—except, of course, for much weakness," he replied, pointedly addressing the girl and ignoring her glowering aunt. "By the time I got here he was a little stronger. Yet I didn't encourage him to talk or to excite himself in any way. However, he seemed so restless when I told him to lie still

and be quiet that I thought it would do him less harm to ask and answer questions than to lie there and fume with impatience. So I told him—a little. And I let him tell me—a little.”

He paused. Miss Gregg glowered afresh. Doris clasped her hands in appeal. Lawton resumed:

“And together with the letters and so on that I found in his satchel when I went through Rackrent Farm again yesterday I think I’ve pieced out at least the first part of the story. I wouldn’t let him go into many details. And when he came to accounting for his presence at Rackrent he grew so feverish and excited that I gave him a hypo and walked out. That part of the yarn will have to keep till he’s a good deal stronger.”

“In brief,” commented Miss Gregg, acidly, “you pumped the poor lad, till you had him all jumpy and queer in the head, and then you got scared and doped him. A doctor is a man who throws medicines of which he knows little into a system of which he knows nothing. I only wonder you didn’t end your chat with Clive by telling him you couldn’t answer for his life unless you operated on him for something-or-other inside of two hours. That is the usual patter, isn’t it?”

“He has been operated on already,” returned Lawton in cold disdain.

Then maddeningly he stopped and affected to busy himself with shaking down his clinical thermometer.

“Operated on?” repeated Doris, as her aunt scorned to come into range by asking the question. “What for?”

Again her pleading voice and eyes won Lawton from his grievance.

“If I can do it without a million impertinent interruptions, my dear,” said he, “I’ll tell you and Thax all about it.”

“Go ahead!” implored Vail.

“As I say,” began the doctor, “I inferred much of this from the letters and other papers I found in Clive’s bag at the farm. He corroborated or corrected the theory I had formed. Briefly, he was wounded at Château-Thierry. Shell fragment lodging almost at the juncture of the occipital and left frontal. Crushed the sutures for a space of perhaps—”

“I’m quite sure there is a medical dictionary somewhere in the library,” suggested Miss Gregg with suspicious sweetness. “And later I promise myself a rare treat looking up such

spicy definitions as 'occipital' and 'sutures.' In the meantime—”

Dr. Lawton shifted his position in such a way as to bring his angular shoulder between his face and that of his tormentor. Then he went on:

“He was badly wounded. A bit of bone splinter pressed down on the brain—if part of my audience can grasp such simple language as that—completely destroying memory. After the Armistice, Osmun made a search for him and found him in a base hospital, not only in precarious bodily health but entirely lacking in recollection of any past event. He did not so much as recall his own name. He didn't recognize Oz or know where he was nor how he got there.”

“Poor old Clive!” muttered Vail.

“Oz brought him back to America. For some reason that I can't even guess—it was at that point Clive began to get feverish and incoherent—Oz smuggled him across the Continent and 'planted' him in a sanitarium up in Northern California. He placed him there under another name, paying for his keep, of course, and leaving word that every care was to be taken of him. The sanitarium doctors held out absolutely no hope for his mental recovery, though

his physical health began to improve almost at once.”

“To judge by the way he looks now,” commented Vail, “his physical health has gone pretty far in the opposite direction since then.”

“It’s had enough setbacks to make it do that,” said the doctor. “But he’ll pull through finely now. He’s turned the corner.”

“I didn’t mean to interrupt,” apologized Thaxton. “Fire away.”

“Well, with Clive disposed of—presumably for life—Osmun comes back here to Aura,” proceeded Lawton. “And here for some reason I can’t make out, he elects to be both himself and Clive. His own long illness—trench fever, laymen call it—had left him partly bald. He stopped in New York and had a wigmaker-artist build him a toupee that corrected the only difference in appearance between Clive and himself. To make the change still greater he bought those thick-lensed specs. I have tested them. The lenses are of plain glass, slightly smoked. And he cultivated a limp and a sag of the shoulder. Then he embarked on his Jekyll-Hyde career among us.”

“It didn’t seem possible when you people told

me about it first," said Doris, as the doctor paused again for dramatic effect. "But the more I've thought it over the easier it seemed. You see, their faces were just alike. They both knew the same people and the same places and Osmun knew every bit of Clive's history and associations and tastes and mannerisms. The only things he had to keep remembering all the time were the disguise and the shoulder and the limp and to take that horrid rasp out of his voice when he impersonated Clive. He— Go on, please, doctor. I'm sorry I interrupted again."

"That's all I actually know about Osmun's part in it," resumed the doctor. "And a lot of that is only deduction. But I do know about Clive. At the sanitarium he had tried to walk out through a door in the dark. The door proved to be a second story window. Clive landed on his head in the courtyard below. They picked him up for dead. Then they found he was still breathing, but his skull was bashed in. There was just one chance in three that a major operation might save him. There was no time to communicate with Osmun, even if he had given them his right name and address—which he had not. So they operated. The operation was a success—"

“And in spite of that the patient lived?” asked Miss Gregg, innocently.

Paying no heed to her, Dr. Lawton continued:

“Clive came to himself as sound mentally as ever he had been and with his memory entirely restored. He remembered everything. Even to Osmun’s sticking him away in the sanitarium at the other side of the world. His first impulse was to telegraph the good news to his twin. Then he got to thinking and to wondering. He couldn’t understand Oz’s queer actions toward him. And he meant to find the answer for himself.”

“That’s just like him!” commented Vail. “He would.”

“He didn’t want to give Oz a chance to build up some plausible lie or to interfere in any way with his getting home,” said Lawton. “At last, after all these years, he seems to have caught just an inkling of his precious twin brother’s real character. He made up his mind to come home unheralded and to find out how matters stood. It wasn’t normal or natural, he figured, for Oz to have taken him clear to California and put him in that sanitarium under an assumed name. There was mischief in it somewhere. He decided to find where.

“He had only the clothes he wore and his father’s big diamond ring—the one your great-uncle gave old Creede, you remember, Thax. Clive never wore it. But he used to carry it around his neck in a chamois bag because it had been his father’s pride. Well, as soon as he could walk again, he sneaked out of the sanitarium, beat his way to San Francisco on a freight, and hunted up a pawnbroker. The pawnbroker, of course, supposed he had stolen the ring, so he gave Clive only a fraction of its value. But it was enough cash to bring him east.

“He was still weak and shaky, and the long, hot, cross-continent ride didn’t strengthen him. In fact, he seems to have kept up on his nerve. He got to New York and thence to Stockbridge, and hired a taxi to bring him over to Aura. He knew he could trust the two old negroes at Rackrent Farm to tell him the truth about what was going on. For they were devoted to him from the time he was a baby. So he had the taxi drive him straight to the farm before hunting up Oz or any of the rest of us. And there, apparently, he walked straight in on Oz himself.

“That’s as far as he got—or, rather, as far as I’d let him get—in his story just now. For he grew so excited I was afraid he’d have a re-

lapse. I didn't even dare ask him what he meant that day by mumbling to us that Osmun had frozen to death. It's queer he should have known, though. Unless—"

"Unless what?" urged Doris, as Lawton paused frowning.

He made no reply, but continued to stare frowningly at the floor.

"Unless what, doctor?" coaxed Doris.

Dr. Lawton looked up, impatiently, shook his head and made answer:

"I don't know, my dear. I don't actually know. And until I do know I am not going to make a fool of myself and let myself in for further ridicule from your amiable aunt by telling my theory. I formed that theory when I examined every inch of Rackrent farmhouse yesterday—the time I found Clive's satchel. But it's such a wild notion—and besides the thing was smashed and empty and there was no proof that it ever had contained what I guessed it had—"

"What thing, doctor?" wheedled Doris, in her most seductive manner. "What thing was smashed and empty? And what did you 'guess' it had contained? Tell us, won't you, *please?*"

“Not till Clive is strong enough to tell all his story,” firmly refused Lawton. “Then if he corroborates what I—”

“In other words, Doris, my child,” explained Miss Gregg, with gentle unction, “when Clive tells—if he ever does—our wise friend here will say: ‘Just what I conjectured from the very first.’ It is quite simple. Many a medical reputation has risen to towering heights on less foundation. My dear, you are still at the heavenly age when all things are possible and most of them are highly desirable. Ezra Lawton and I have slumped to the period when few things are desirable and none of those few are possible. So don’t grudge him his petty chance to score an intellectual hit. Even if he should be forced to score it without the intellect.”

The old lady was undergoing one of her recurrent spells of chronic dyspepsia this day—by reason of dalliance with lobster Newburg at dinner the night before.

At such crises her whole nature abhorred doctors of all degrees for their failure to prevent such attacks when she had refused to live up to their prescribed dietary.

Especially in these hours of keen discomfort

did she rejoice to berate and affront her valued old friend, Dr. Lawton, he being the representative of his profession nearest to hand.

And always her verbal assaults, as to-day, had the instant effect of making him forget his reverent affection for her, turning him at once into her snarling foe.

Doris, well versed in the recurrent strife symptoms between the old cronies, came as usual to the rescue.

“Doctor,” she sighed admiringly, “I think it’s just wonderful of you to have pieced all this together and to have made Clive tell it without overexciting him. Auntie thinks it’s just as wonderful as I do. Only—”

“Only,” supplemented the still ruffled Lawton, “she doesn’t care to jeopardize her card in the Troublemakers’ Union by admitting it?”

“Personally,” said Miss Gregg with bitterly smiling frankness, “I’d rather be a Troublemaker than an Operation-fancier. However, that is quite a matter of opinion. And medical books have placed ignorance within the reach of all. Medical colleges teach that sublime truth: ‘When in doubt don’t let anybody know it!’ But—”

“It’s a miracle,” intervened Vail, coming to

the aid of peace, "that poor old Clive could have come through this as he has. Wounded, then falling out of a window, then—whatever may have happened to him when he met Oz—and getting well in spite of it. By the way, sir, has he asked to see any of us?"

Dr. Lawton was stalking majestically doorward. Now on the threshold he paused. His jarred temper rejoiced at the chance to pick out any victim at all to make uncomfortable.

"Yes," he returned, "he has. He asked for Doris here not less than eight times while I was up there."

The girl flushed hotly. Vail went slightly pale. Then he followed the doctor hastily from the room on pretense of seeing the visitor to the front door. Doris and Miss Gregg looked silently at each other.

"Youth is stranger than fiction," said the old lady, cryptically.

Doris, scarlet and uncomfortable, made no reply. And presently Thaxton Vail came back into the room.

"Doris," he said very bravely indeed, "Dr. Lawton says it won't do Clive any harm at all to see you after he has slept off the quarter-grain of morphia he gave him. He says it may

do him a lot of good. I'll tell the nurse to let you know when he wakes."

Then, not trusting himself to say more lest he lose the pleasant smile he maintained with such sore-hearted difficulty, he went quickly out again, hurrying upstairs on his errand to the nurse.

His soul was heavy within him. Before the war he knew Clive Creede had been his dangerous rival for Doris's favor. Time and again Vail had had to battle against pettiness in order to avoid rancor toward this lifelong chum of his.

Then, after the supposed Clive's return from overseas, Vail had been ashamed of his own joy in noting that Doris's interest in Creede seemed to have slackened, although the man himself was still eagerly her suitor.

And now—now that the real Clive was back—surrounded by the glamour of mystery and of unmerited misfortune—the real Clive, whose first question had been for Doris—Thaxton Vail's air-castles and the golden dreams that peopled them seemed tottering to a crash.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHEN HE CAME HOME

YES, manfully Vail climbed the stairs to the anteroom, where the severely stiff and iodoform-perfumed nurse sat primly reading while her patient slept. Across the threshold of the sick chamber lay stretched a tawny and fluffy bulk.

There, since the moment Clive Creede had been carried in, had lain Macduff. At nobody's orders would he desert his self-chosen post of guard to his stricken master. He ate practically nothing, and he drank little more.

Several times a day Vail dragged him from the doorway with gentle force and put him out of the house. But ever, by hook or crook, the collie made his way in again, and fifteen minutes later he would be pressing close against the door on whose farther side was Clive.

Again and again he tried to slip past nurse or doctor into the sickroom. Again and again nurse or doctor trod painfully on him in the dark as he lay there.

But not once did the collie relax his vigil. His master had come back to him. And Macduff was not minded to risk losing him again by stirring away from his room.

Vail stooped now and patted the disconsolate head. To the nurse he suggested:

“As soon as Mr. Creede wakes up, let Macduff go in and see him, won’t you? He loves the dog, and I know him well enough to be sure it won’t hurt him to have his old chum lie at his bedside instead of out here.”

“Dogs carry germs,” sniffed the nurse in strong disapproval.

“They carry friendliness, too,” he reminded her, “and companionship in loneliness. And they carry comfort and loyalty and fun. We know they carry those. We are still in doubt about the germs. Let him in there when Mr. Creede wakes. If it were I, I’d rather have my chum-dog come to my bedside when I’m sick than any human I know—except one. And that reminds me—Dr. Lawton would like you to notify Miss Lane as soon as Mr. Creede is wide awake. The doctor says Creede has been asking for her and that it’ll do him good to see her.”

Vail moved wearily away. He felt all at once

tired and old, and he realized for the first time that life is immeasurably bigger than are the people who must live it.

The world seemed to him gray and profitless. The future stretched away before him, dreary and barren as a rainy sea.

For these be the universal symptoms that go with real or imaginary obstacles in the love race, especially when the racer is well under thirty and is in love for the first time.

Two hours later as Thaxton sat alone in his study laboriously trying to occupy himself in the monthly expense accounts he heard the nurse go to Doris's room.

He heard (and thrilled to) the girl's light footfall as she followed the white-gowned guardian along the upper hallway and into the sick room. He heard the door close behind her. Its impact seemed to crush the very heart of him.

Then, being very young and very egregiously in love, Thaxton buried his face in his hands above the littered desk—and prayed.

It was nearly half an hour before he heard the door reopen and heard Doris leave.

Her step was slower now. In spite of Vail's momentary hope she did not pause when she reached the top of the stairs, but kept straight

on to her own room, entering it and shutting the door softly behind her.

That night the nurse reported gayly to Vail that the invalid seemed fifty per cent better and that he had actually been hungry for his supper. Wherefore—as though one household could hold only a certain amount of hunger—Thaxton failed to summon up the remotest semblance of appetite for his own well-served dinner.

But he talked very much and very gayly at times throughout the meal, and he even forced himself to meet Doris's gaze in exaggeratedly fraternal fashion and to laugh a great deal more than Miss Gregg's acid witticisms demanded.

Macduff, too, graced the evening meal with his presence for the first time since Clive's arrival. For hours he had lain beside his master's bed, curled happily within reach of Clive's caressing hand. The dog's deadly fear was gone—the fear lest he should never again be allowed to see and to be with his god.

Clive was still there and was still his chum. And the barrier door was no longer closed. Thus Macduff at last had scope to think of other things than of the terror of losing his rediscovered deity. Among these other things was the fact that he was ravenously hungry and that at

Thaxton's side at the dinner table there was much chance for tidbits.

Hence he attended dinner, lying again on the floor at Vail's left for the servants to stub their toes over as of yore.

"So we have the sorrowing Macduff among us once more!" remarked Miss Gregg. "That is what I call a decidedly limited rapture. Especially when he registers fleas. I verily believe he is the most popular and populous flea-café-teria in all dogdom. Why, that collie—!"

"Oh, I love to see him lying there again, so happy and proud!" spoke up Doris, tossing him a fragment of chicken. "Dear old Mac!"

Thaxton's smile became galvanic and forced. His heart smote painfully against his ribs.

"Love me, love my dog!" he quoted, miserably, to himself.

Under cover of Miss Gregg's railings against long-haired canines that scratched fleas and lay where people stumbled over them Vail lapsed into gloomy brooding.

"A week ago," he told himself, chewing morbidly on the bitter reflection, "a week ago Macduff cared more for me than for any one else. Doris certainly cared no more for any one else than she cared for me. And to-night—!"

Neither of them has a thought for any one but Clive Creede. The half-gods may as well put up the shutters when the whole gods arrive. Funny old world! . . . *Rotten* old world!”

“Just as there are only two kinds of children—bad children and sick children,” Miss Gregg was orating, “so there are only two kinds of dogs—fleasome dogs and gleesome dogs. Fleasome dogs that scratch all the time and gleesome dogs that jump up on you with muddy paws. Isn’t that true, Thax? Now admit it!”

Hearing his own name as it penetrated, shrilly, far down into his glum reverie, Vail recalled himself jerkily to his duties as host.

“Admit it?” he echoed fervently. “Indeed I *do!* I’d have acted just the same way myself. I think you did the only thing any self-respecting woman could have done under the circumstances. Of course, it was tough on the others. But that was their lookout, not yours.”

He sank back into his black brooding; all oblivious of the glare of angry bewilderment wherewith the old lady favored him and of Doris’s wondering stare.

Next day Dr. Lawton declared Clive vastly improved. The following morning he pronounced him to be firm-set on the road to quick

recovery. On the third day he ventured to let the convalescent tell his whole story, and Clive was none the worse for the ordeal of its telling.

The doctor, going downstairs again, found awaiting him two members of the same trio who had listened to his earlier recital. Doris had driven in to Aura for the mail and had not yet returned. Thus only her aunt and Thaxton greeted the doctor on his descent from the sick room.

Thanks to a scared course of diet, Miss Gregg had subdued her gastric insurrection and therefore had lost her savage yearning to insult all doctors in general and Dr. Lawton in particular.

She hung upon his words to-day with flattering attention, not once interrupting or taking advantage of a single opening for tart repartee.

The doctor's spirits burgeoned under such civility. He told his story well and with due dramatic emphasis, seldom repeating himself more than thrice at most in recounting any of its details.

Stripped of these repetitions and of a few moral and philosophical sidelights of his own, the doctor's narrative may be summed up thus:

Having safely disposed of his twin in the

California sanitarium, Osmun Creede returned to Aura. There he resolved to begin life afresh. He had several good reasons for doing this.

No one knew better than he that he had made himself the most unpopular man in the neighborhood, and, as with most unpopular men, his greatest secret yearning was for popularity. In the guise of his popular brother this seemed not only possible but easy of accomplishment.

Too, he was doggedly and hopelessly in love with Doris Lane. He knew she did not care for him. He knew she could never care for him. She had told him so both times he had proposed to her.

But he had a strong belief that his brother Clive had been on the point of winning her when the war had separated them. He was certain that, in the guise of Clive, he could continue the wooing and bring it to a victorious end.

But his foremost reason for the masquerade was that he had lost in speculation all his own share of the \$500,000 left by their father to the twins and that he had managed secretly to misappropriate no less than \$50,000 of his brother's share.

It was this shortage which decided him to go

back to Aura in the dual rôle of both brethren, instead of following his first impulse and going as Clive alone.

Were it known that Osmun had vanished—were it believed he had died—the trust company which was his executor would seek to wind up his estate. In which case not only his own insolvency but his theft of the \$50,000 must come to light.

He trusted to time and to opportunity to make good this shortage and to cover its tracks so completely that they could not be discovered by officious executors or administrators. A few coups in the stock market would do the trick.

But until such time he must continue to stay alive as Osmun. After that it would be time enough to get rid of his Osmun-self in some plausible way and to reign alone as Clive.

Thus it was, after his return, he strove in every way to enhance his Clive popularity at the expense of Osmun. And in a measure he succeeded.

But almost at once he struck a snag.

That snag was his inability to counterfeit Clive's glowingly magnetic personality. He could impersonate his brother in a way to baffle

conscious detection. Yet, while outwardly he was Clive, he could not ape successfully Clive's lovable personality.

Folk did not warm to the supposed Clive as they had warmed to the real Clive. They did not know why. Vaguely they said to one another that his war-experiences had somehow changed him.

They liked him because they had always liked him and because he did nothing overt to destroy that liking. But he was no longer actively beloved.

Most of all Osmun could see this was true with Doris Lane. He felt he had lost ground with her and that he was continuing to lose it. She still received him on the old friendly footing. But she showed no faintest sign of affection for him.

Conceited as to his own powers, Osmun would not admit that the fault was with his impersonation. He attributed it wholly to the fact that Thaxton Vail had come back from France some months earlier than himself and had thus cut out Clive.

Hence Osmun set his agile wits to work to get Vail out of his path. With Thaxton gone or discredited he believed his own way to Doris

would be clear. He believed it absolutely and he laid his plans in accordance.

Always he had hated Vail. This new complication fanned his hate to something approaching mania.

Sore pressed for ready cash or collateral to cover his stock margins and pestered to red rage by Thaxton's increasing favor in Doris's eyes, the chance of making public the "hotel clause" in Osmun Vail's will had struck him merely as a minor way to annoy his enemy.

Then, learning by chance that Doris and her aunt were to take advantage of the clause by going to Vailholme, he arranged adroitly to be one of the houseparty in the guise of Clive.

At once events played into his hands.

On inspiration he robbed the various rooms that first evening, while, in his rôle of invalid, he was believed to be dressing, belatedly, after his hours of rest.

Purposely he had avoided molesting any of Vail's belongings, that the crime might more easily be fixed upon the host. Creede had outlined a score of ways whereby this might be done.

There was another motive for the robbery. Its plunder would be of decided help in easing

his own cash shortage. The money-plunder was inconsiderable. But he would have only to wait a little while and then pawn or sell discreetly the really valuable jewelry.

The theft had been achieved without rousing a shadow of doubt as to his own honesty. As Clive, under pretense of friendship, he sought craftily to direct suspicion to Vail. As Osmun he openly voiced aloud that suspicion. It was well done.

He had counted on making Doris turn in horror from Thaxton as a sneak thief. But he found to his dismay that his ruse had precisely the opposite effect on her. Desperate, wild with baffled wrath, he resolved on sweeping Vail forcibly and permanently from his path.

The idea came to him when he saw, lying on the living-room table, the big knife which, as Clive, he had given to Vail. As always, Creede carried in his hip pocket a heavy-caliber revolver. But pistols are noisy. Knives are not.

Pouching the knife, as Thaxton carried his limp-armed body past the table on the way to his room, he had made ready to use it in a manner that could not attract suspicion to himself.

It had been easy for him as his fingers brushed the table, when he was carried past it, to pick

up the knife—even easier than it had been for him to palm the Argyle watch, a little earlier, and then to pretend to pull it from Vail's pocket in the presence of the chief.

As a child Creede had whiled away a long scarlet-fever convalescence by practicing sleight-of-hand tricks wherewith his nurse had sought to entertain him. A bit of the hard learned cunning had always lurked in his sensitive fingers.

As he was the first to go to bed he had no means whatever of knowing that the man moving noisily about in Vail's adjoining room as he undressed was not Thaxton.

Creede waited until the house was still. Then silently he crept out into the hallway and tried Vail's door. It was unlocked. Barefoot, he crept to the bed, guided only by the dim reflection of the setting moon on the gray wall opposite.

By this faint light he made out the form of a man lying asleep on his side. Osmun struck with force and scientific skill.

The sleeper started up with a gurgling cry. Creede, in panic, stilled the cry with a blow from the carafe at his hand.

But, as he smote, an elusive flicker of moon-

light showed him the victim's full face. And he knew his crime had been wasted.

Terrified, yet cooler than the average man would have been, he caught up a shoe that his bare foot had brushed. Running to the window, he pressed it hard on the ledge, scraping off a blob of mud that adhered to it. Then he threw the curtain far to one side. Tossing the shoe back under the bed, he bolted for his own room.

On the way he stopped long enough to take the key from the lock, insert it on the outer side, lock the door, pocket the key and glide back to his adjoining room, just as Macduff's wild wolf-howl awakened the house.

There, shivering and cursing his own stupidity, he crouched for a minute before venturing out into the hall to join the aroused guests.

He had made it seem the murderer had entered and gone out through the window. He felt safe enough, but sick with chagrin.

During that eternal minute of waiting he, perforce, changed his whole line of action. He had failed to rid himself of his foe. The only move left to him was to strive to fix the murder on Vail. And this, both as Clive and as Osmun, he proceeded with all his might to do.

In telling this to Clive when they met next

day at Rackrent Farm he declared passionately that he would have succeeded in sending Thaxton to prison and perhaps to execution but for Miss Gregg's inspired lie—which he accepted as truth—and for the item of the shoeprint on the window-sill.

Checkmated at every turn and dreading to see any one until he could rearrange his shattered line of action, he went secretly to Rackrent Farm. He calculated that his fabrication about a gas-explosion in the laboratory, there, would prevent acquaintances from seeking him at the farmhouse.

In endorsement of the gas story he already had given his two negro house-servants a week's holiday and had had them taken by taxi to Pittsfield. So the coast would be clear.

Arrived at the farm, he strayed into the laboratory. Chemistry and chemical experiments had ever been the chief amusement of the twins. Their laboratory was as finely equipped as that in many a college. They had spent money and time and brains on it for years.

When the laboratory had been moved to Rackrent Farm from Canobie it had been set up in a large rear room. Here in leisure hours Osmun still pottered with his loved chemicals.

And here to-day he fared; to quiet his confused brain by an hour or two of idle research work.

Here it was that his brother Clive walked in on him.

Curtly the returned twin explained his advent and still more curtly he demanded to know the meaning of Osmun's treatment of him. At a glance the horrified Osmun saw that this returned brother was in no mood to be cajoled or lied to.

And from previous knowledge of Clive he chose the one possible method whereby he believed he might make his peace and might even persuade the returned wanderer to leave the field to him.

Throwing himself on his brother's mercy, he told him the whole story, omitting nothing.

For once in his twisted career Osmun Creede spoke the simple truth. Judiciously used, truth is a mighty weapon of defense, and the narrator had the sense to know it. In any event he saw it was his one chance.

But the Clive who listened with disgusted amaze to the recital was not the untried and easy-going Clive of boyhood days, the Clive who had allowed himself to be dominated by his

brother's crotchety will, and who had loved Osmun.

This was an utterly new Clive—a Clive whose pliant nature had been stiffened by peril and heroism and hardship in war and by hourly overseas contact with death and suffering.

It was a Clive who had been betrayed by his brother while he lay sick and stricken and deprived of memory. It was a Clive freed of Osmun's olden influence and fiercely resentful of his wrongs at his brother's hands.

He heard Osmun's tale in grim silence. At times he winced at the tidings it gave. Oftener his haggard face gave no sign of emotion.

The narrative finished, Osmun soared to heights of eloquence. He pointed out how damning to himself and to his future would be the reappearance of Clive in the Aura community. It would wreck Osmun in pocket and in repute. It might even send him to prison.

Clive's face as he listened was set in a stern white mask.

Osmun appealed to their boyish days, to the memory of their honored father, and he conjured up pictures of the disgrace that must fall on their father's name should this secret become a local scandal.

Clive did not speak, nor did his grim face change.

Osmun painted glowing portraits of the wealth that was to be his as soon as his new Wall Street ventures should cash in. The bulk of this wealth he pledged to Clive if the latter would go to some foreign land or to the Coast and there await its arrival.

Clive's mask face at this point twitched into a momentary smile. The smile was neither pretty nor encouraging.

Osmun, stung by his lamentable failure to recover any atom of his former ascendancy over his brother, fell to threatening.

Again Clive's tortured mouth relaxed into that unpromising smile. But again the memory of Doris Lane and of the impersonation whereby Osmun had sought to win her in his helpless brother's guise banished the smile into hard relentlessness. Clive was seeing this worthless twin of his for the first time as the rest of the world had always seen him.

Pushed over the verge of desperation, Osmun Creede saw he had but one fearsome recourse. If he would save his own liberty and perhaps his life as well—to say nothing of fortune and position—this new-returned brother must be made

to vanish. Not only that, but to disappear forever, leaving no trace.

Osmun must be allowed to continue playing his double rôle as before and to follow it to the conclusion he had planned. Anything else spelt certain destruction.

Clive must be disposed of before any neighbor or one of the servants could drop in and discover his presence. There was always an off chance of such intrusion.

Whipping out the heavy-caliber revolver he always carried, Osmun Creede leveled it at the astonished Clive.

“I’m sorry,” he said evenly. “But I’ve got to do it. If I could see any other way out I’d let you go. But you’ve brought it on yourself. I can hide you in the cellar under here till night and then bury you with enough of the right chemicals to make it impossible to identify you if ever any one should blunder onto the grave. I’m sorry, Clive.”

He spoke with no emotion at all. He felt no emotion. He was oddly calm in facing this one course open to him.

Now Clive Creede had spent more than a year in war-scourged lands where human life was sacrificed daily in wholesale quantities and

where death was as familiar a thing as was the sunlight. Like many another overseas veteran he had long ago lost the average man's fear of a leveled firearm.

Thus the spectacle of this pistol and of the coldly determined eyes behind it did not strike him with panic. It was a sight gruesomely familiar to him from long custom. And it did not scatter his wits. Rather did it quicken his processes of thought.

"If you're really set on murdering me, Oz," he said, forcing his tired voice to a contemptuous drawl, "suppose you do the thing properly? For instance, why not avoid the electric chair by waiting till there are no witnesses?"

As he spoke his eyes were fixed half-amusedly on the laboratory window directly behind his brother. He made a rapid little motion of one hand as if signaling to some one peering in at the window.

It was an old trick—it had been old in the days when Shakespeare made use of it in depicting the murder of the Duke of Clarence. But it served. Most old tricks serve. That is why they are "old" tricks and not dead-and-forgotten tricks.

Osmun spun halfway around instinctively to

get a glimpse of the imaginary intruder who was spying through the window upon the fraternal scene.

In the same moment, with all his waning frail strength, Clive lurched forward and brought his right fist sharply down on Osmun's wrist.

The pistol flew from the killer's jarred grasp and clattered to the floor. By the time it touched ground Clive had swooped upon it and snatched it up.

Osmun, discovering the trick whereby he had been disarmed, grabbed at the fallen pistol at practically the same time. But he was a fraction of a second late.

He found himself blinking at the leveled black muzzle of his own revolver in the hand of the brother he had been preparing to slay.

Osmun recoiled in dread, springing backward against the laboratory wall, directly beneath a shelf of retorts and carboys.

Then his terror-haunted eyes glinted as they rested on his brother.

Clive's sudden exertion and the shock of excitement had been too much for his enfeebled condition of nerve and of body. Something seemed to snap in his brain, and the taut spring

that controlled his fragile body seemed to snap with it.

The pistol wobbled in his nerveless grasp. He swayed backward, his eyes half shut. He was on the brink of absolute collapse.

Osmun Creede gathered himself for a leap upon the half-swooning man.

With a final vestige of perception Clive noted this. Summoning all he could of his lost strength, he sought to save his newly imperiled life by leveling the pistol before it should be too late and by pulling the trigger.

The laboratory echoed and reëchoed deafeningly to the report. And with the explosion sounded the multiple tinkle of falling glass.

Clive's bullet had had less than seven yards to travel. Yet it had missed his brother by at least two feet. It had flown high above the crouching Osmun's head and had crashed through one of the vessels on the shelf.

The receptacle shivered by the heavy-caliber ball was a huge Dewar Bulb, silvery of surface. In other words a double container with a vacuum between the outer and inner glass surfaces. Through both layers of thick glass the bullet smashed its way.

The contents of the inner bulb were thus per-

mitted to burst forth and to cascade down upon the luckless man who was crouching for a leap directly below the shelf.

These contents were liquid air.

Among the favorite recreations of the twins in their laboratory had been their constant experiments with liquid air. They had amused themselves by watching it boil violently at a temperature of 150 degrees below zero—of seeing it turn milk into a glowingly phosphorescent mass, of making it change an egg into an oval of brilliant blue light, an elastic rubber band into a brittle stick, and the like.

Because of their constant experiments they always kept an unusually large quantity of the magic chemical in stock, the Dewar Bulb having been made especially for their use at quadruple the customary size.

In its normal state liquid air has a mean temperature of 300 degrees below zero. And now at this temperature it bathed the man on whom it avalanched.

In less than ten seconds Osmun Creede was not only dead but was frozen stiff.

In through the laboratory's open window gushed the torrid heat of the day, combating and partly quelling the miraculous chill.

Clive had reeled backward by instinct into the hot passageway, shutting the laboratory door behind him. Too well he realized what had happened. The horror and the thrill of it seemed to dispel his dizzy weakness as a glass of raw spirits might have done. But, as in the case of the liquor, that same collapse was due to return with double acuteness as soon as the false stimulation of excitement should ebb.

Presently he ventured back into the terrifyingly cold space where lay the body of the man who had been his brother.

His own mind still confused, Clive could think of but one thing to do.

As he had approached the house he had noted that the bricks of the walk were so hot from the unshaded glare of the sun that their heat had struck through his thin shoe-soles and had all but scorched his feet. If Osmun could be placed out there in the sun there might be a chance that he would thaw to life.

Creede was too much of a chemist to have imagined so idiotic a possibility in his normal mental state. But the shock had turned his reasoning faculties momentarily into those of a scared child.

With ever-increasing difficulty he dragged his brother's thin body out of the laboratory and out of the house onto the stretch of brick-paved walk. The exertion was almost too much for him. It used up nearly all the fictitious strength bred of shock.

He stood panting over the body and striving not to topple to earth beside it. Then he heard the rattling approach of an automobile.

Through the tangle of boxwood boughs he could see the car stop at the gate. In ungovernable panic he staggered back into the house. There, shutting the front door softly behind him, he sank down on a settle in the hall, fighting for self-control.

In a few minutes he had conquered the unreasoning fright which had made him shun meeting any interlopers.

He had caused the death of his brother. He had done it to save his own life. He was not ashamed. He was not sorry. He was not minded to slink behind closed doors when it was his duty as a white man to confess what he had done.

Staggering again to his feet, he made for the front door. With all that was left of his depart-

ing powers he managed to open it and to reach the threshold-stone outside, there to confront his three old friends and the crazily welcoming collie.

Then everything had gone black.

CHAPTER XIX

A MAN AND A MAID AND ANOTHER MAN

“**I**’M just as glad Doris wasn’t here to listen to this,” commented Miss Gregg, breaking the awed pause which followed Dr. Lawton’s recital. “For a perfectly innocent and kindly girl she seems to have stirred up no end of mischief. After the manner of perfectly innocent and kindly girls. She’d be the first to grieve over it, of course. But a billion Grief-Power never yet had the dynamic force to lift one ounce of any bad situation one inch in one century.”

“Well,” said Lawton, reaching for his rusty black hat and his rustier black bag, “I’ve wasted too much time already, gabbling here. I must get to my miserable round of calls unless I want my patients to get well before I arrive. Good-by. Clive will be all right now. He has had the absolute rest he needed. He’ll be as good as new in another week or so. It’s lucky all this has happened before Oz had a chance to squander more than about \$50,000 of

the lad's fortune. He'll have enough left to live on in comfort. To marry on, too."

Off plodded the old gentleman, leaving Thaxton Vail scowling unhappily after him.

"To marry on," muttered Vail under his breath, not knowing he spoke aloud.

"Yes," chimed in Miss Gregg brightly. "Enough to marry on. Almost enough to be engaged on. He's a lucky man!"

"He is," agreed Vail dully. "And a mighty white man, too. One of the very best."

"Yes," assented Miss Gregg with fervor, smiling maliciously on her victim. "One of the very best. Doris thinks so too."

"I know she does," sighed Vail.

He got up abruptly to leave the room. But Miss Gregg would not have it so.

"Thax," she said, "you remember that would-be smart thing Willis Chase said, the evening of the burglary? He said that when a policeman blows out his brains and survives they make him a detective. Well, here's something a hundred times truer: When Providence wishes to extract a man's few brains more or less painlessly and to make him several thousand degrees worse than useless He makes him fall in love. That is not an epigram. It is better. It's a truth. . . .

Thax, do you realize you've been making my little girl very unhappy indeed?"

"I?" blithered Vail. "Making Doris unhappy? Why, Miss Gregg, I—!"

"Oh, don't apologize. She enjoys it. A girl in love, without being divinely unhappy, would feel she was defrauded of Heaven's best gift. Doris—"

"But I don't understand!" protested the miserable Vail. "How on earth have I made—?"

"Principally by being mooncalfishly and objectionably in love with her," said Miss Gregg, "and not taking the trouble to tell her so."

"But how can I? In the first place, Clive loves her. He's never loved any one else. (Neither have I for that matter. I got into the habit when I was a boy, and I can't break it.) He's lying sick and helpless here under my roof. It wouldn't be playing the game to—"

"Love is no more a 'game' than a train wreck is!" scoffed Miss Gregg. "If you weren't a lover, and therefore a moron, you'd know that. It—"

"Besides," he blurted despairingly, "what would be the use? She loves him. I can tell she does. Why, you just said yourself she—"

"I said she agrees with you in thinking he is

‘one of the very best,’ ” corrected Miss Gregg impatiently. “And it’s true. But when you get to my age you’ll know no woman ever loved a man because he was good or even because he was ‘best.’ She may love him for his taste in ties or because his hair grows prettily at the back of his neck or because his voice has thrilly little organ notes in it. Or she may love him for no visible reason at all. But you can take my word she won’t love him for his goodness. She’ll only respect him for it. And if I were a man in love I’d hate to have my sweetheart respect me.”

Vail was not listening. Instead he was staring moodily out of the window. Turning in at the gates and progressing purringly up the drive was an electric runabout. Doris Lane was its sole occupant. At sight of her now, as always of late, Thaxton was aware of a queer little pain at his heart.

“Thax,” said Miss Gregg, bringing the torture to an abrupt end, “last evening Clive Creede asked Doris to marry him.”

Vail did not answer. But between him and the swiftly advancing runabout sprang an annoying mist.

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Miss Gregg surveyed his averted face as best she might. Then her tight old lips softened.

“Doris was very nice to him, of course,” she added. “But she told him she couldn’t marry him. She said she was in love with some one else—that she had always been in love with this stupid some one else. . . . Better go and help her out of the car, Thax.”

But with a tempestuous rush and with the glow of all the summer winds in his face Thaxton Vail already had gone.

Miss Gregg looked after him, her hard old eyes curiously soft, her thin lips moving. Then ashamed of her unwonted weakness, she drew herself together with an apologetic half-smile.

To an invisible listener she said briskly:

“Thank Heaven, he’s outlived his uselessness!”

THE END

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