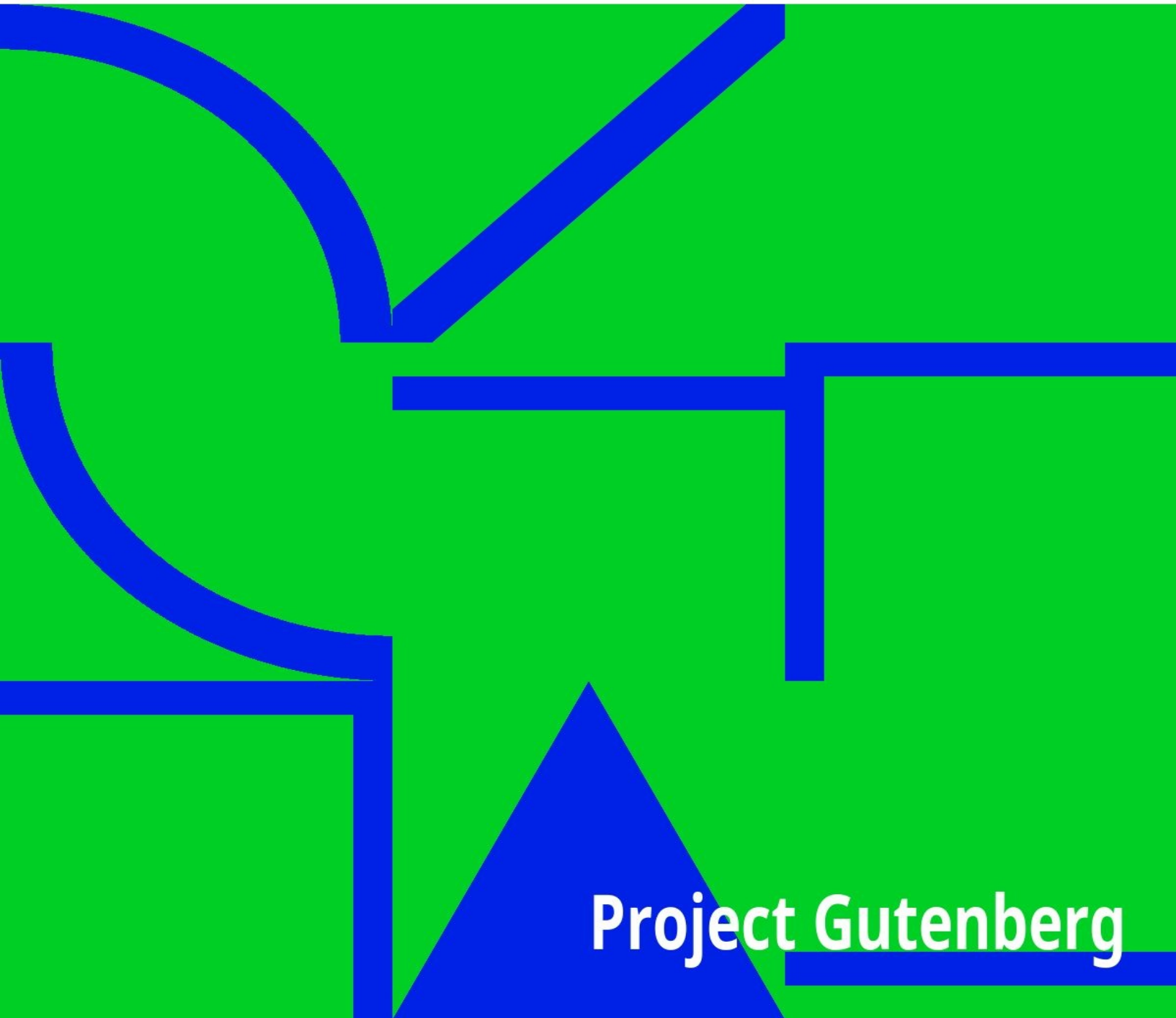
In Jeopardy

Van Tassel Sutphen



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IN JEOPARDY

Books by

VAN TASSEL SUTPHEN

IN JEOPARDY
THE CARDINAL'S ROSE

HARPER & BROTHERS, Publishers

Established 1817

IN

JEOPARDY

By

Van Tassel Sutphen

Author of

"The Cardinal's Rose," Etc.

HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS

NEW YORK AND LONDON

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Chapter I

I Find Some New Relations

The letter which lay before me had been written in old-fashioned longhand on the business stationery of the law firm of Eldon & Crawford, their given address being Calverton, Maryland. For the third time I read over the missive, although certainly it was short and to the point, its meaning unmistakable. But judge for yourself.

CAL

MARYLAND,

Jun

22, 1919.

MY DEAR SIR,—The funeral services for the late Francis Hildebrand Graeme Esqre., of "Hildebrand Hundred," King William County, Maryland, will be held at S. Saviour's Church, Guildford Corners, Maryland, on Thursday, June 24, 1919, at three o'clock post meridian.

In view of the fact that you are a beneficiary under Mr. Graeme's will I am forwarding this communication by special delivery, in the hope that you may be able to attend the services and be present at the reading of the testament.

I am enclosing a time schedule of the Cape Charles route, and would suggest that you take the morning express from Baltimore. By giving notice to the conductor the train will be stopped at Crown Ferry, the nearest railway point to "Hildebrand Hundred." If you will advise me by telegraph of your coming I will see that a conveyance is in waiting. Trusting that you may find it possible to make the journey, and taking the liberty of placing our legal services at your disposal,

I remain, my dear sir,

You

obedient servant,

JOH

ELDON.

HILDEBRAND, ESQRE.

Yes, this was all perfectly plain and understandable. Francis Graeme, the distant cousin whom I had seen just once in my life, had died suddenly at his Maryland home; as a member of the family and a presumptive legatee it was my duty to offer the last respects in person. Yet there had been something more or less odd about the whole business. It had been the Civil War which had made a lasting breach between the Northern and Southern branches of the Hildebrand family; for more than a generation there had been no social intercourse whatever. Moreover, during that period, the name had shown a tendency to disappear for good and all, the usual fate of old families who live too close to the ancestral soil and dislike the noisy wheels of the world's progress. The late owner of the "Hundred" did not even bear the family patronymic, his Hildebrand descent being on the distaff side. I, in turn, am an orphan, without brothers or sisters; more than that I have no near relatives in the paternal connection; indeed I had never heard of any immediate bearers of my name until one day, some three months ago, when Francis Graeme called at my Philadelphia office, introduced himself, claimed me as kin, and carried me off to a luncheon which extended itself into dinner and then lasted to a midnight supper. It had been a case of liking at first sight, although Graeme was a man of forty-five or so, while I lacked three years of thirty. However, years—mere years—don't signify if people really "belong," and Graeme and I had lost no time in laying the foundations of a friendship that promised a more than ordinary degree of permanence. It had been arranged that I should come down to "Hildebrand Hundred" for a long visit, but one thing after another had happened to prevent; I had been presented with an actual law case, Graeme was called West for a month, one of my college class reunions had been scheduled for the first part of June; so it went. And now poor Graeme was dead and nothing could be as we had planned it during that long afternoon and night at the old University Club on Walnut Street. Strange, I had not heard that he was ill, but our correspondence had been most irregular, and most likely the attack had been a sudden one—heart disease or perhaps a stroke. Of course I must go down to Maryland, albeit the journey would be a depressing one; I might even find it a little awkward to appear at the house in the character of a new-found relative. I ought to explain that the family at the "Hundred" now consisted of Miss Lysbeth Graeme and her cousin, Miss Eunice Trevor. Of course I had never met either of them, but Graeme had spoken of both girls at our first and only meeting; he seemed especially fond of Lysbeth, or Betty, as he called her. Betty Graeme—rather an attractive name I think—was some half

dozen years my junior, and any normal-minded young man would find the acquisition of a brand-new feminine cousin an interesting possibility. But that was before this distressing business of Francis Graeme's death, and I should feel more or less the intruder. It was evident, however, that Mr. Eldon's letter must have been sanctioned by Miss Graeme, and, I dare say, Graeme had spoken to his daughter of having made my acquaintance, and warmly, too; consequently, I should have to go and be decent, stay over night if that were unavoidable, and then slip away Friday morning with my legacy—perhaps a hundred dollars with which to procure the mourning-ring so dear to the hearts of mid-Victorian novelists.

In spite of the special delivery stamp the letter had been delayed somewhere, and it was not handed over to me until early Thursday morning, the messenger awaking me out of an unusually sound sleep by the simple expedient of keeping his finger pressed firmly upon the electric push button of my tiny room-and-bath lodgings in the "Clarendon." When I had rubbed the Sandman's dust out of my eyes, and had taken in the general purport of the epistle, I glanced at the clock and saw that I had less than an hour in which to make my toilet, settle my business affairs and catch the train. Yet I made it easily enough, for, outside of bath and breakfast, I had only to telephone the friend with whom I shared a diminutive law office that I should not be back until Friday, and that our progressive match at golf would have to be postponed to that date. Happily or unhappily, as you choose to look at it, there were no clients to put off and no real business exigencies to consider. Come to think of it, I am not so sure that I was ever intended for the bench and bar, and certainly the world has not gone out of its way to avail itself of my store of legal knowledge. Mine was just the usual case of a young man reading law because, on leaving the university, nothing more tangible had presented itself. Moreover, the quarterly paid income from my mother's estate is sufficient for my modest needs and perhaps deprives me of any real incentive for hard work. Now the successful man is usually self-made, meaning that he has been forced to play the role of a creator and make something out of nothing. It makes me blush sometimes when I reflect what would happen if that quarterly cheque ever failed to turn up in the mail; had I anything of real value to offer the world in exchange for shelter, raiment, and what my newsboy calls three "squares" a day? Not that I am altogether a cumberer of the ground (as a golfer I have been well-trained and always take care to replace my divots), but there is no particular reason for my existence on this planet, and there are not many people who would either know or care that I was no longer of their number. Cynical? not at all; at least I had not intended to

give that impression. But my two years' war service destroyed some illusion, even though I hadn't the luck to get across the water.

Finally, I may call myself a decent enough chap when compared to the ordinary run of men, and while I don't pretend to philanthropic activities I can say quite honestly that there is no man, or woman either, who may truthfully affirm being the worse off for having enjoyed the distinction of my personal acquaintance. At best, this is only a negative virtue, and there are times when I feel keenly that I ought to be adding something definite to the world's stock of material good or ethical treasure. I can't flatter myself that I possess anything more than the one talent, and my quarterly dividend makes a convenient napkin in which to enwrap it; the old allegory seems to fit my case precisely. I dare say that life for me has been a trifle too pleasant and well-ordered; people who live on Easy Street become more and more attached to their *otium-cum-dig*; I have visions of myself less than a score of years away: portly, tonsured, inclined to resent the existence of boys and dogs, fussily addicted to carrying about to dinner parties my own particular brand of pepper in a little, flat, silver box. Perhaps if I should fall in love, but pooh! I have been invoking that contingency so long and so unavailingly that it has lost a large portion of its pristine appeal. No, I can't see that there is anything better for me to do than to go on drawing my income, sitting religiously for at least six hours a day in my office, sticking at golf until I finally get the best of that hideous tendency to hook, and dining as usual on Mondays with the Mercers *en famille*; in short, whittling my individual peg to fit my allotted hole. I do think, however, that I'll tell Bob Mercer he can count upon me for one evening a week at his Julian Street settlement. Bob is the right sort of a cleric, and I know that he talks by the card when he insists that giving and getting are really interchangeable terms. But one always hates to make the effort and so prove the truth of the assertion; it is infinitely less trouble to let some other fellow get the true meaning and joy out of life while you content yourself with the corner seat at the club fireside and the comfortable certainty that the chef understands to a dot how you like your cutlets and asparagus tips. Just the same I will speak to Bob—and meanwhile I have awakened to the realization that it is ten minutes to nine and that only a taxi-driver with no reverence for the speed laws can deliver me at the Pennsylvania station in time for the southbound train. I do make it, with a quarter of a minute to spare, and now I remember that I have forgotten to send a wire to Mr. Eldon. I can telegraph him at Wilmington, but there is small chance of its being delivered in time; probably I shall have to rustle my own means of conveyance to "Hildebrand Hundred." I shall have full two hours between the arrival of my train at Crown Ferry and the time appointed

for the funeral. That ought to be sufficient even if I have to walk.

The ride over the Cape Charles route is not particularly interesting; moreover, it was infernally dusty, and the food provided by the buffet on the Pullman seemed extraordinarily unappetizing. Where on earth does the company procure such tasteless provender? Everything tastes so desiccated and deodorized, the mere shadow of really substantial viands, a veritable feast of Barmecide. There was the usual delay owing to a freight wreck, and my two hours of leeway had shrunken to a scant sixty minutes by the time I had alighted at the little flag station of Crown Ferry.

Not a very inviting place, this shabby way station set in a wilderness of jack-pine and hackberry trees. There was not a soul in sight, outside of the depressed looking individual who served as general utility man and who apparently resented the intrusion of a stranger upon his lonely domain. To my inquiry concerning the possibility of obtaining some sort of conveyance, he returned a monosyllabic "Nope," and he showed not the smallest inclination to give me any real assistance in finding my way to "Hildebrand Hundred"; he pointed out the general direction, with a lean, tobacco-stained finger, and let it go at that.

There was no house in sight, nothing but the two rutted tracks of a sandy country road leading off toward the west and bifurcating itself a couple of hundred yards away from the station—"deepo" in the vernacular. I understood, from the scant information vouchsafed me, that I was to take the left-hand fork, and after prevailing upon the agent, in consideration of two of my choice cigars, to take temporary charge of my kit-bag, I started off on my three-mile tramp.

Once through the belt of scrubby woodland, the appearance of the country began to change for the better, and the further I traveled from the coast line the more rolling and diversified it became. The sand gave place to loam, an improvement in which the highway shared, the fields were neatly fenced, and, with the added attractions of oak and hickory groves, the landscape began to appeal; this was good farming land and a pleasant place of rural residence.

I passed several farm houses, but since the day was unusually cool for the month of June and as I rather enjoyed the exercise of walking, I concluded not to bother about hiring a trap. A farmer whom I encountered, at a cross-roads where there was a little cluster of half a dozen houses, informed me that S. Saviour's Church was distant about a mile; but already it was half after two o'clock and I realized that I should not have time to present myself at the house before the funeral

cortège started. The obvious procedure was for me to wait at the church until the party from "Hildebrand Hundred" had arrived; I could then introduce myself to Mr. Eldon and be assigned to my proper position among the mourners.

"Or if you like," continued my new acquaintance, "you can save more'n half way to the church by cuttin' across the Thaneford property. You go in by that stile yander," and he pointed a hundred yards down the road.

I felt a trifle doubtful about the propriety of taking a short cut across private grounds, and said as much. "You are quite sure that Mr. Thaneford doesn't object?" I asked.

"Of co'se he objects," declared my rural friend, who now informed me that his name was Greenough and that he was the newly elected sheriff of the county. "He objects powerful. But the Co'te has decided that it's a public right-of-way. And when the law gives a man his rights he's bound to maintain them."

"Why the right-of-way?" I asked.

"The Thaneford property was a royal grant," explained Sheriff Greenough, "but S. Saviour's had been built before that, and the folks here in Guildford Corners retained right of access to their parish church. By the road it's full a mile."

"A relic of the established church of colonial days," I remarked. "Nowadays no one is obliged to attend S. Saviour's."

"No," admitted the Sheriff, "and I'm a Baptis' myself. But we keep our rights, for nobody knows when we may want to use 'em."

Since Mr. Thaneford was apparently unreconciled to the exercise of ancient ecclesiastical privilege, I was about to say that I, as a stranger, did not propose to become a party to the controversy; but a glance at my watch showed me that I would have to take the short cut if I hoped to reach the church by three o'clock.

"Mr. Graeme's funeral?" inquired Greenough. "Well, he was a good man and a good neighbor. I'd be there myself if I hadn't business at the Co'te-house to look after. Yes, sir, straight ahead and you can't miss the path. Glad to have obliged you, sir; good evening."

Beyond the stile the path ran across a piece of meadow land; thence through a hardwood grove, rising gently to a little plateau upon which the mansion was situated. The house was of the Georgian period with the usual pretentious

portico; it seemed badly out of repair and was surrounded by unkempt lawns, paddocks, and gardens. I saw that the path would lead me within a comparatively short distance of the house, and I rather sympathized with the owner's resentment at the invasion of his privacy under cover of law. Yet I must go on, and I quickened my pace so as to get out of sight of the house as quickly as possible.

A powerfully built young man came around the corner of what, in its day, must have been a very considerable glass-house, and confronted me. Not a pleasant face, with its prominent cheekbones and black V of eyebrows furrowing the low, heavy forehead. "What are you doing on this property?" he demanded with a truculency that made me dislike him instantly and completely.

"It's a public right-of-way," I retorted.

"We don't admit that," he said hotly. "The case has been appealed; if necessary, we'll carry it to Washington."

Well what was I to do? I had no desire to get into a dispute with this rustic boor, and yet it was imperative for me to go on if I were to reach the church in time for the service. Much as I disliked the man I must put myself in the position of asking a favor from him.

"I presume that I am addressing Mr. Thaneford?" I began inquiringly.

"I'm John Thaneford—what then?"

"As you see, I am a stranger here. At the Corners I was told that I could take this short cut and so save time and distance in reaching the church."

"Oh, S. Saviour's!"

"Yes. I am a relative of the late Mr. Francis Graeme and came this morning from Philadelphia to attend the funeral."

John Thaneford looked up sharply, the V of eyebrows narrowing. "I didn't know Graeme had any kin in Philadelphia," he said suspiciously. "Or, for that matter, anywhere."

"That may be true so far as the Graeme side of the family is concerned," I rejoined. "My name is Hildebrand."

"Hildebrand!" He stared at me even more intently than before, and I fancied that

there was a subtle note of dismay in the ejaculation. I determined to follow up the advantage, if advantage it was.

"Hugh Hildebrand, to be precise," I continued, eyeing him steadily. "We are of the Northern branch, and since the Civil War there has been little or no intercourse with the family of the 'Hundred.'"

"Yet you come to Francis Graeme's funeral. Why?"

My temper flashed up. "And what damned business is that of yours, Mr. John Thaneford!" I snapped out. "Am I to pass or not?"

For an instant he glowered, and I saw the pupils of his coal-black eyes contract to a pin point. Then he took an evident pull upon himself; he spoke with a marked change of demeanor, almost courteously.

"I'm afraid I've been acting rather rudely," he said, and stepped aside out of the path. "But these country bullies have been most annoying of late, insisting upon their so-called rights out of mere, petty spite. It's part of their creed, you know, to hate a gentleman." I nodded. I could see now that John Thaneford was by no means the rustic lout of my first impressions. Not that I liked him any the better, but at least we spoke the same language.

"It's a silly fiction," he went on, "this alleged necessity of access to the parish church. Nowadays, everybody at the Corners goes to the Baptist or Methodist meeting-house, and S. Saviour's congregation is gathered chiefly in the churchyard. Outside the Graeme and Thaneford families there ar'n't more than a dozen regular parishioners, and the church is only opened for service once a month."

By this time we were walking side by side in the direction of the house. For some inscrutable reason Mr. John Thaneford had made up his mind to be decently polite; indeed the effort was plainly apparent. Consequently, I could do no less than fall in with his new mood.

"I suppose S. Saviour's is a colonial foundation," I remarked.

"Yes, even to the inevitable Queen Anne Communion plate. But the countryside has changed and the bigger estates have been cut up into small holdings. That always brings in a different set of people. And the old and the new don't mix well."

"Precisely. And so there are empty pews at S. Saviour's."

"More of them every year. A young chap comes over from Lynn the first Sunday in the month and holds service; so I'm told, at least. Otherwise, the church is only opened for weddings, christenings, and funerals; and the latter outnumber both the former. What's the answer?" He laughed cynically.

"It's a pity," I said regretfully. "I always hate to see the old order displaced. But surely if someone took the lead—well, why not yourself?"

"I haven't been inside the building since I used to get whaled for not knowing my catechism. And I've small use for parsons," he continued, dourly.

We walked on in silence, that hostile silence which sooner or later is sure to declare itself between two natures essentially antagonistic. Since John Thaneford and I could not be friends, nor even remain indifferent, we should never have met at all. But the fact had been accomplished and we should have to put up with it; I fell to wondering if he, too, sensed the vague presentiment of future clash and struggle; in the meantime I was uncomfortable; I wanted to get away.

"The original right-of-way turns here," said Thaneford suddenly, "but I can take you across the lawn, and thence it is only a step, through a fir plantation, to the churchyard. Besides, I want you to meet my father; he will be interested in knowing you since the Hildebrands and the Thanefords have been neighbors for seven generations; yes and kin, too, as we reckon such things down here. My mother was a sister of old Richard Hildebrand, and that makes me a second or third cousin of this Francis Graeme, who inherited the family property, although he did not bear the family name. If it were a question of direct descent either you or I might have put in a better claim to the 'Hundred.'" He looked at me slantingly as though to assure himself that the idea had not already presented itself to my mind. I murmured an unintelligible assent; what was coming now?

"And it follows logically that we two are kin. How does that strike you, Cousin Hugh Hildebrand," he added coolly.

"Better than being thrown out as a trespasser," I answered with the most convincing imitation of a smile that I could conjure up. "But I think I ought to be getting along; it's ten minutes to three."

"Remember that you are now south of Mason and Dixon's line," he rejoined, "and time is made only for slaves. But come along," and he led me, inwardly

protesting, across the weedy expanse of what had once been a handsome piece of ornamental grass to where an old man sat in a big arm-chair under the shade of the most beautiful white oak that I had ever beheld in my life, an almost perfectly symmetrical ball of limbs and foliage. Then I looked at Fielding Thaneford and straightway forgot about the wonders of inanimate nature.

Certainly a very old man, and yet his skin was of a remarkable texture and quality, apparently as fine and softly pink as that of a baby. The resemblance to an infant was intensified by one distinguishing characteristic of the massive head and features—the total absence of any hirsute adornment; there was not a vestige of hair, beard, eyelashes, or eyebrows, and the effect was singularly repulsive. Yet he did not seem to be afflicted with the ordinary infirmities of senility, for he turned at the slight noise of our approaching footsteps and the eye that scanned me was of a cold, bright blue, indicative of a keen and finely coordinated intelligence.

"Father," said John Thaneford in his hatefully false voice of assumed cordiality, "this is our cousin, Hugh Hildebrand, of Philadelphia."

I fancied that the placid figure in the great chair stiffened slightly at the sound of my name. But otherwise he made no movement or sign, continuing to gaze upon me with those unflinching eyes, as horrible in their total lack of lashes as the optics of a vulture.

"He is here to be present at the funeral of Cousin Francis Graeme." Again that coldly devouring gaze passed over me; involuntarily I shivered and stepped back. What was the impression that was being made upon me? Not of malignancy certainly, nor even of ordinary cold-bloodedness; there was something too detached about this singular personality to suggest any kind of commonplace, healthy passion; if the crater had ever existed it had long since cooled to slag and ashes. There was but one fitting adjective—inhuman. Whatever spirit it was that still held its abode behind that fresh, childlike masque it endured altogether of its own volition and outside the sphere of those blessed, understandable things of our common life. In the world but not of it, if one may use that divine metaphor in its inverted sense. The babe possesses innocence in that it has never come into contact with sin and death, and a man may finally withdraw himself from the defilements of this naughty world and become again as a little child. Yet without repentance and so without grace. Lucifer himself could never assume the role of penitent, but he may easily take front rank as an ethical philosopher. And so Fielding Thaneford and I looked upon one another.

Either might have put out a touching hand, and yet a thousand leagues could not have spanned the abyss that separated us. And in that selfsame moment the bell of S. Saviour's began to toll for the passing of him who had been master of "Hildebrand Hundred," and kin, through the blood tie, to one and all of us who waited and listened.

Fielding Thaneford had turned his eyes away, and they were fixed on the road winding far below the plateau on which stood "Thane Court"; in the distance appeared a stately moving cortège, the hearses and the carriages containing the mourners; there was a flutter of sable draperies and of funeral plumes; the old man looked, but remained immobile and impassive. With a nod of acknowledgment and farewell to John Thaneford I made my own way down the slope and into the shadow of the plantation of firs. There still remained the faint traces of a path, and presently it led me to the brick wall surrounding the churchyard, a wall built after the curious serpentine pattern generally ascribed to the inventive genius of Thomas Jefferson, and still to be seen at the University of Virginia. A door, painted a dull, faded green, had evidently been the private approach of the Thaneford family in days gone by, but now it was secured by a huge, rusty padlock, and I was obliged to skirt the wall and so reach the open lawn upon which the church faced.

Chapter II

The Setting of the Stage

S. Saviour's, with its tiny portico and steeple of distinctly Christopher Wren design, presented an interesting study in colonial architecture. It was built of brick, with solid, white wooden shutters, and the side walls were mantled by a wonderful growth of true English ivy. There was no central entrance, access to the interior being afforded by two side doors at the extreme ends of the portico. The reason for this unusual arrangement became apparent upon entering the church, the shallow chancel, together with the pulpit and lectern, being situated at the front end of the edifice, with the pews facing toward the entrance doors. This made it rather awkward for the late comers, as the laggards were obliged to meet the united gaze of the congregation already seated; also the ladies of S. Saviour's enjoyed exceptional opportunities for appraising the interesting features of their neighbors' costumes. Doubtless this singular reversal of the ordinary ecclesiastical plan had been adopted purposely, so as to carry out the principle of orientation. The church happened to face directly east, and consequently the chancel and sanctuary had to be placed opposite their usual positions, a curious survival of mediævalism.

Under the trees two or three ancient surreys had been parked, and a glance through the side windows disclosed an audience of perhaps a dozen persons, small farmers of the neighborhood and their wives, people to whom a public function of any nature offered acceptable diversion from the routine of daily life. Of the old-time gentry of the countryside there was not a single representative present; then I literally lost my breath in amazement as John Thaneford brushed past me without a word, strode into the church, and seated himself in a large, square pew, furnished, after the manorial fashion, with carpet, table and chairs; evidently the ecclesiastical freehold of the Thaneford family. Yet why should I feel any particular degree of surprise? The Graemes and the Thanefords were "kin," and it was simple decency that John Thaneford should show his cousin the last tribute of respect; his presence was perfectly natural and proper, and assuredly it was none of my business to either question or resent it. At this moment I became aware that the funeral procession had arrived at the gate, and I took up a convenient position for presenting myself to the attention of Mr.

Eldon; I fancied that it would not be a difficult task to identify him.

There were but three coaches in the queue, the first containing the undertaker and his assistants, the second conveying two heavily veiled ladies, presumably the daughter and niece of Francis Graeme; and the third occupied by an elderly couple who could be none other than Mr. and Mrs. Eldon. I stepped forward as the latter party alighted.

"Mr. Eldon?" I inquired. "I am Hugh Hildebrand."

Mr. Eldon extended a plump, warm hand. "So glad you were able to get here," he whispered. "This is Mrs. Eldon. You must sit with Miss Trevor and Betty; wait, and I'll explain it to them."

The clergyman in his robes was standing at the door, and the service was about to begin. I took my designated position, walking immediately behind the two chief mourners; and we followed the great, black cloth-covered coffin into the stillness of the sacred edifice.

The committal office was said at the graveside in the Hildebrand family plot, a walled enclosure set off from the general churchyard and entered through a lych-gate beautifully fashioned from black bog oak that resembled ebony in color and closeness of grain. Strange, how the attention strays even upon occasions such as this; for I found myself contemplating the lych-gate with absorbed interest, trying to think where I had seen its prototype; doubtless in some English parish churchyard. Then, as I heard the symbolic clod falling from the hand of the officiating minister, I recalled myself to reality—earth to earth, dust to dust. The slender, black-garbed figure on my right shook slightly and swayed against my shoulder; instantly I put out my hand to steady her. Up to this moment my participation in the ceremony had been of a purely formal nature, but now some underlying and compelling force was drawing me into the circle of sorrow; the dead man was of my blood, and this was the passing of something in the universe that was akin to my very self.

John Thaneford had not been present at the interment. After the church service he had met and engaged Mr. Eldon in earnest conversation for perhaps half a minute; then he had taken a visibly hurried departure.

The funeral party returned to the church, and the coaches drove up to the carriage-block. "This is Mr. Hugh Hildebrand," announced Mr. Eldon, as he presented me to the two ladies. "Miss Graeme and Miss Trevor," he continued

with a touch of old-time courtliness, his top-hat held at a strictly ceremonious angle, "Mr. Hildebrand."

Miss Trevor merely bowed, but Miss Graeme smiled—such a frank, friendly smile—and held out her hand. There are people who greet you with a reserve which at least temporarily chills, and there are others who make you feel that this particular meeting is the one they have been pleasurably anticipating from the very beginning of created things. And so, when I felt the strong, warm pressure of Betty Graeme's palm, how could I help being flattered, even intrigued. I concluded that my new cousin must have liked me on sight, and I was quite ready to return the compliment in kind. Under the heavy, black veil I could discern a symmetrical oval of countenance, and imagination easily supplied the customary accessories of vermilion lips, challenging eyes, and perfumed tresses. In reality, I should never in the world have been able to recognize Betty Graeme by the sense of sight alone, but I should know that handclasp anywhere; and that was enough.

"Of course you are coming back to the house," said Miss Graeme. "Will you ride with us—but I see that Mr. Eldon has arranged to take you with him. Are you ready, Eunice?"

Sitting opposite Mr. and Mrs. Eldon in the big, lumbering landau of *ante-bellum* days I began my explanations and apologies.

"That doesn't matter in the least," interrupted Mr. Eldon. "We'll send over to Crown Ferry for your bag, and after you get the railroad dust washed away you can make your peace with Betty. The important thing is that you are here now."

"I hadn't expected to remain at the 'Hundred' for more than an hour or two," I continued. "There is an up train through at six o'clock, and I had arranged to stay over at Baltimore."

"I'm afraid that you'll have to put up with us for this particular night," rejoined Mr. Eldon. "Perhaps longer," and the shadow of an enigmatical smile passed over his pleasantly curved lips.

"But at a time like this!" I protested. "Remember that I met Mr. Graeme only once, and that I am an entire stranger to his niece and daughter. Even Southern hospitality has its limits, and I don't want to overstep them."

Mr. Eldon brushed my objections away with a commanding wave of his hand.

"Not much danger of that," he said. "You are one of the family, duly accredited and acknowledged. So unless there is some pressing—I should say imperative—necessity for your going North to-night——"

"Oh, not at all," I interrupted. "Not the least necessity, if that is what you mean."

"Of course you must stay," put in Mrs. Eldon. "Betty expects it, and she would never understand any conventional excuse."

Another carriage, driven at a much faster pace than the ancient Eldon bays were capable of achieving, had drawn up from behind, and was now passing us. To my surprise, I saw that the back seat was occupied by John Thaneford and his father; no salutations were exchanged, and the Thaneford equipage rolled onward in a cloud of dust. Mr. Eldon noticed my evident astonishment, and proceeded to enlighten me. "Yes, they are going to the 'Hundred.' You know that the will is to be read immediately following the return of the funeral party from the church."

"As they always do in English novels of the Trollope period."

"I dare say it is one of our imported Maryland customs. The Thanefords are blood relations, and, *ipso facto*, that gives them a right to be present at the reading of the testament."

"Relations, but not necessarily friends," I hazarded, and Mr. Eldon looked surprised.

"I should have explained that I have already made the acquaintance of Mr. Fielding Thaneford and his son," I went on, and Mr. Eldon registered, in movie parlance, still greater astonishment. I proceeded to tell of my chance encounter.

"Fielding Thaneford never misses a Hildebrand funeral," remarked Mr. Eldon, and there was a peculiar sense of dryness in his tone. "Moreover, this is the second occasion of the sort within a twelvemonth."

"Mr. Graeme succeeded his maternal great uncle, I believe."

"Yes, that was old Richard Hildebrand who reigned at the 'Hundred' for over half a century. Fielding Thaneford married his much younger sister, Jocelyn, and consequently young John really stood closer in the line of inheritance than did Francis Graeme, the latter being one step further removed. But there was no entail and old Richard could devise the property as he saw fit."

"A disappointment then to the Thanefords?"

"Well, there's the 'Hundred'; you can judge for yourself."

We had turned out of the main road, and, having passed through a pair of finely wrought iron entrance gates, we were now proceeding along an avenue of noble lindens. Across the stretch of ornamental water on our right appeared the really imposing facade of "Hildebrand Hundred"; I scanned the edifice with a keen and growing interest; this was the ancestral home of all the Hildebrands, and a sudden emotion held me in grip.

The house was built of yellow brick imported, so Mr. Eldon informed me, from Holland. The entrance porch, two stories in height, was of semi-circular design with columns of limestone, and the fenestration above the principal entrance embodied the familiar Palladian motive. The main part of the building was almost a square, but it was balanced by wings on either side. At the extreme rear was another rectangular extension, one story and a half in height, oblong in shape, and surmounted by a squat dome. "The library," explained Mr. Eldon, as the curving driveway carried us past the terrace commanded by the lofty windows of this subsidiary structure. "That stained glass is English, and the experts pronounce it to be of unusually fine quality."

"Rather surprising when one thinks of all the bad glazing in our churches," I remarked interestedly.

"Well, if you know or care much about such things you'll find the 'Hundred' glass worth your attention." He turned to his wife: "Ellen, my dear, if you will take charge of our guest, I'll get my papers together and meet you in the library. The sooner the formality is over the better for Eunice and Betty."

Alighting, in our turn, at the entrance porch I followed Mrs. Eldon through the great doors and into a handsome octagonal hall, paved with black and white marble squares, with its well open to the roof beams. On the right, splendid mahogany folding-doors gave into the dining room, and the corresponding room on the left was evidently the drawing room. At the back of the hall the principal staircase rose in two semi-circular sweeps, meeting at a landing place on the first floor level and connecting with longitudinal galleries on either side of the hall. Of the two wings, the one on the left contained the ballroom and picture gallery, while that on the right was taken up with the kitchen, pantries, and other offices. Passing under the staircase landing and proceeding along a comparatively narrow corridor, lined on either side by glazed bookcases, one entered the library

extension at the extreme end of the house.

"Will you go in and wait for a few minutes," whispered Mrs. Eldon. "John never knows where all his papers are, and I must help him sort them out." I bowed and walked on.

At the library door an imposing figure of a negro butler relieved me of my hat, gloves and stick; I slipped into a seat near the entrance and looked about me with no small degree of curiosity. The Thanefords, father and son, were established near the fireplace, directly opposite the entrance door, but since they did not look up at my appearance nor pay the smallest attention to my half bow of salutation I was perfectly content to maintain the *status quo* of non-intercourse.

The apartment was assuredly one of noble proportions, being full forty feet in length by perhaps twenty-five in width. The ceiling of this story and a half extension must have been at least sixteen feet in height. The shallow dome had a diameter of fourteen feet or so; it was unpierced by windows and the painting in distemper which ornamented its smooth convexity represented the classic adventure of Jason and the Golden Fleece.

The fireplace was of Caen stone with the family arms of the Hildebrands sculptured in the central panel. Not being versed in heraldic lore I may say briefly that the shield bore checkerboards and conventionalized lilies in alternate quarterings, while the crest was a mailed arm holding a burning torch or cresset. This last was interesting to me, for we Northern Hildebrands have always used as our crest a battlemented tower with flames issuing from its summit. But the motto: "Hildebrande à moy," is shared in common by both branches of the family.

The side walls had no openings and were lined from top to bottom with book shelves. The unusual height of the ceiling made narrow iron balconies necessary in order to give access to the upper shelves, and these galleries were reached by spiral staircases placed behind grilles in the dark corners on the entrance side. The end wall was pierced by four immense windows, two on either side of the fireplace, and these were filled with the English stained glass of which Mr. Eldon had spoken. They really seemed to be excellent examples of the art, and I proceeded to examine them with interest.

The designs were of Scriptural origin, Old Testament scenes to be exact, and I note them in order from left to right.

The window at the extreme left depicted the youthful Joseph journeying to Dothan and wearing his coat of many colors; in the background his jealous brethren are awaiting his coming and fomenting their unfraternal conspiracy.

The window adjoining the fireplace on the left represented the rebellion of the sons of Korah and their terrible fate in being swallowed up alive by the gaping earth; the black and menacing sky, shot through with the red zigzag of the lightning, seemed exceedingly realistic.

In the companion window on the right was shown the return of the Israelitish spies from the coveted land of Canaan, bearing great clusters of purple grapes from the valley of Eschol; in the distance, Jericho, with Rahab's house perched high upon the city wall and distinguished by its hanging cord of scarlet.

The fourth window, the one at the extreme right, reproduced the contest on Mount Carmel between Elijah and the pagan prophets, the fire from heaven consuming the burnt offering of Jehovah, the terror-stricken flight of the hierophants of Baal, and the little cloud, like to a man's hand, arising from the sea. Of the four windows this last one was perhaps the most interesting, although all of them were excellent in composition, substantially and skilfully leaded, and gorgeously rich in color. I don't know why we can't make such reds and blues in this country, but of course the old established English firms have been perfecting their formulas and processes throughout the centuries.

Since three of the four walls were lined with bookcases, and the remaining one had to provide for the windows and fireplace there was no available space for pictures, but on the blank wall above the central entrance door hung a magnificent tapestry depicting the tragic fate of Actæon devoured by his own hounds. The polished black oak floor was covered with Eastern rugs, and a fine silver-tip grizzly bearskin lay on the hearthstone. The couches and big, comfortable reading chairs were upholstered in dark green leather, very handsome and substantial, while directly under the dome stood a massive, flat-topped library desk made of teakwood. The accompanying swivel-chair was mounted on a bronze mushroom foot firmly secured to the floor by means of bolts; it was so placed that the occupant had his back to the windows, with the light coming over his shoulder after the proper fashion for comfort.

I have been particular in thus describing the furnishings and internal economy of the library, for in this room lay the very heart of the mystery so soon to present itself; later on I was destined to make myself acquainted with every square inch

of its large area, only to fail in my attempt to discover its menacing secret. Fortunate indeed that Betty's feminine intuition asserted itself in the nick of time. But I must not anticipate the solution of the problem while the prime factors in the equation still remain unstated. Enough then to acquaint the reader with the general disposition of the stage upon which the drama was shortly to unfold itself.

The great room was very quiet, the evening shadows were beginning to lengthen, and still we waited.

Chapter III

Hildebrand of the "Hundred"

It must have been close to an hour before Mr. Eldon joined us; evidently his papers had been in more than usual confusion. A few minutes later the ladies appeared, together with a dozen or more negro servants connected in various capacities with the estate. John Thaneford jerked himself to his feet in apparently unwilling acknowledgment of the social amenities; his father, sitting impassively upright in an immense leather chair, looked more than ever like some gigantic, impossible infant. Miss Graeme went over and spoke a few words to him, but he barely nodded in reply; Buddha himself could not have improved upon that colossal, immemorial serenity. I had hoped that Betty would say something to me, but she contented herself with the briefest of smiles in my direction. A pretty girl? Why, yes, I suppose she would be so considered, with her slim, graceful figure and that pronounced type of Irish beauty—dark hair, eyebrows, and eyelashes; but the eyes themselves of the clearest cerulean blue, rubbed in with a smutty finger, as the saying goes. Yet somehow one never thought over-much of how fair Betty Graeme might be to look upon; perhaps it was just her perfect and altogether adorable femininity which made her different from other women; she entered the room, and forthwith all eyes were inevitably focused upon her; when the gods arrive the half-gods go, as Mr. Emerson acutely remarked. A phenomenon then, but I can't account for it and don't intend to try. Personality, magnetism—but these are just words, and she was Betty Graeme. A line from an old, half forgotten mediæval romance came back to me as I gazed upon her: "By God's Rood! that is the one maid in the world for me."

A revelation then, but love at first sight is by no means so common a thing as youth is apt to suppose. Only when it does come there can never be any doubt about it. I drew in my breath sharply, and the tense thrill seemed to permeate every molecule and atom of my being. Then came the reactionary thought: "But what can she be thinking of me?" and my exalted spirits evaporated with startling suddenness. The very warmth and kindliness with which she had at first greeted me only emphasized the immensity of the distance that divided us. The goddess may condescend to smile upon a mortal, but that does not imply that the poor man is safely on the Mount Olympus list. Just then I happened to glance up

and caught the look bent upon her from under John Thaneford's beetling eyebrows. That boor, that uncouth, rustic bully! And yet he was of her class; they must have been playmates from childhood, the Thaneford acres marched with the Hildebrand holdings—why not? and my heart sank to my boots. Then I realized that I was on the point of making a pretty considerable fool of myself, and I resumed my seat; Mr. Eldon went through the usual preliminary hemmings and harrings, and the company prepared itself to listen.

The crisp sheet of parchment crackled in the lawyer's hands, and now he was reading, in an even monotone, the last will and testament of Francis Graeme.

A few minor legacies to the servants and dependents, the bequest of a thousand dollars for the endowment of S. Saviour's parish, and then: "To Lysbeth Effingham Graeme, my dearly beloved daughter by adoption, I give and bequeath the sum of one hundred thousand dollars, invested in first mortgage bonds of the Southern Railway, the silver dinner service bearing the Effingham coat-of-arms, and the four portraits of the Graeme family now hanging in the long gallery at 'Hildebrand Hundred'; the inheritance tax to be paid from the residue of my personal estate. I furthermore bequeath to the said Lysbeth Graeme my gold hunting-case watch, with the accompanying fob and seals, together with such articles of *vertu*, not specifically enumerated in the annexed inventory of Hildebrand goods and chattels, as she may select."

The speaker paused and cleared his throat; from some far corner of the silent room came a half suppressed exhalation, the physical reaction from tensely held emotion; I looked over at the elder Thaneford, and noted wonderingly that he had risen from his chair and that the extraordinary pink-and-white of his complexion had changed to a dull, minatory brick-red; he seemed about to speak, and I held my breath. Then, as Mr. Eldon indicated that he was on the point of resuming, the old man yielded to the insistent pressure of his son's hand, and sank back in his seat.

I suppose that I must have listened physically to that next paragraph, but my mind was slow, deadly slow, in comprehending the full measure of its import; then, suddenly, I understood.

To dispense with legal phraseology, the testator now directed that the undivided estate of "Hildebrand Hundred," together with the remainder of all personal property, should go to his friend and near kinsman, Hugh Hildebrand, of Philadelphia, to be held by him and his heirs forever.

Well, you remember that I had been expecting the bequest of a small sum of money for the purchase of some such trifle as a ring or a stick-pin; and it took me a full minute to realize that this incredible thing had actually happened: a man whom I had seen but once in my life had made me his heir, and I was now the master of a great estate and a personage to boot; I sat motionless, trying to sort out my ideas into some degree of order and sequence.

Fielding Thaneford had found his feet again; he must, in his prime, have been a big and powerful man, for he still overtopped his stalwart son by full two inches of height. He looked particularly at Mr. Eldon, but with a commanding sweep of his arm he seemed to draw the entire company into the circle of his attention; he dominated us all by the sheer weight of his will; he opened his mouth to speak, and we inclined our ears to listen.

But the words trembling upon his lips never found utterance, for now a terrible thing had happened and Fielding Thaneford fell to the floor and lay there, his face twitching strangely. A paralytic stroke, of course, but one must be an eye witness, see the victim actually struck down, to realize the full import of such a tragedy. One moment the man stands erect and serene in the unquestioned possession of all his godlike qualities of mind and body; the next, he lies as inert and insensate as an ancient tree trunk riven and felled by the lightning stroke. Fielding Thaneford was an old man—nearly ninety, as I was later on to learn—but so well preserved that it was difficult to realize that the hour of his passing had struck. And the determining factor in this final equation is so often comparatively insignificant. Here is a human being, an integral member of the visible universe, by right enumerated in every taking of the cosmic census: somewhere a minute blood vessel fails to perform its function, and the number is instantly replaced by a cipher.

When the family physician, Doctor Marcy, finally arrived he directed that the sick man should be put to bed at "Hildebrand Hundred"; in the absence of a regular ambulance it would be unwise to try and get him home. It was Betty who came and told me of the doctor's decision.

"You will have to make formal tender of your hospitality to John Thaneford," she said.

"I!" I gazed at her in honest stupefaction.

"You are Hildebrand of the 'Hundred,'" she reminded me, her lip trembling ever so slightly as she spoke.

"If you wish it so," I said humbly, and thereupon I went upstairs and knocked at the door of the sick room. John Thaneford opened it, and stood glowering as I delivered my message. I dare say I expressed myself in bungling terms, but my awkwardness was easily outpaced by his ungraciousness; he intimated curtly that neither he nor his father would be dependent upon my hospitality an instant longer than might be absolutely necessary. I proceeded to fume inwardly as I walked away, but my irritation vanished the moment I rejoined Betty; somehow one could not cherish mere pettiness in her serene presence.

"Can you spare me a few moments?" I asked, and with an assenting nod she led the way back to the now deserted library. The westering sun was pouring through the great windows, and the purple radiance from the gigantic bunch of grapes borne by the Israelitish spies lay in a crimson pool on the oaken floor; involuntarily I drew aside, unwilling to step upon the apparently ensanguined spot. Betty divined instantly my movement of repulsion. "It does suggest that very thing," she said, with a little shiver. "Come over here by the chess table. Father and I were accustomed to play every night; he used to wonder what sort of game you would give him when you came on that long expected visit."

"Sorry, but I'm not a chess player. However, that doesn't matter now, and I've brought you here to say that I don't propose to take advantage of that will. Your father couldn't have meant it; it's your property and you should have it. The whole thing is absurd; he couldn't have realized what he was doing."

"You met my father at least for that one time," she retorted. "Did he give you any reason to think that he didn't know his own mind, or that the time would ever come when he wouldn't know it?"

I was silent. Certainly, infirmity of purpose was the very last thing to be predicated of the more than ordinarily forceful personality of the late Francis Graeme. But I am somewhat stubborn myself. "I don't care," I persisted. "'Hildebrand Hundred' isn't mine, and I won't take it."

Miss Graeme looked at me. "You know the will refers to me as only his daughter by adoption," she said, "and I could have no right to inherit the 'Hundred.' That was always clearly understood between us. He did leave me all that he could call his own."

"I don't see how that matters. The estate belonged legally to Mr. Graeme."

"Merely because Mr. Richard Hildebrand chose to ignore the claims of the heir-

at-law. And a blood relation at that."

"Meaning Mr. John Thaneford, I suppose."

Miss Graeme looked surprised. "Has Mr. Eldon been acquainting you with the particulars of the family history?" she asked.

"I first learned of the actual facts from Mr. John Thaneford himself."

Now there was something more than surprise in my Cousin Betty's demeanor; she seemed agitated, even uneasy.

"Apparently," I went on, "both the Thanefords resent what they consider to be an alienation of the estate. I don't believe they will feel the original wrong has been righted by my becoming the heir, even though I happen to be the only titular Hildebrand among us all."

"But this is Maryland, you know, and many of the old English customs are still in force. Not legally, of course, but practically."

"Such as primogeniture and the continuous entail," I suggested.

"Yes. But only among the old families, you understand. It's a purely sentimental feeling."

"How long have the Hildebrands been at the 'Hundred'?"

"There was Lawrence Hildebrand——"

"My great-great-great-grandfather," I interjected.

"Yes. Well, he received a patent from the Crown. It must have been early in the seventeenth century when the second Charles Stuart was giving away principalities with both hands. There has been a Hildebrand as master ever since, except for my poor father's brief reign."

"Brief?"

"Richard Hildebrand died in June, 1918. That is just a year ago."

"My father was proud of the old family connection," continued Miss Graeme, after a little pause, "and at one time he even contemplated changing his patronymic, and so becoming actually Hildebrand of the 'Hundred,' But he never quite got to the legal process, or perhaps he then heard of you and that served to

divert the current of his thoughts. When was it that he hunted you up in Philadelphia?"

"It was in March."

"He liked you certainly, and he was most anxious to have you visit us at the 'Hundred.' You were to come in the early part of June, I think."

"Yes, but that was the week of my college reunion, and I had to decline. I wrote that I would accept for a later date—any time in July."

"I remember his being very much disappointed. But he must have made up his mind finally about that time, for the will is dated May 20, a little over a month ago. I dare say he was anxious to tell you of his wishes in the matter."

"It's rather extraordinary, you'll admit. A man whom I had met but once!"

"Well if one belongs at all, you know it. I think I can guess what was in his mind; something like this: 'Hildebrand Hundred' ought to go back to the direct heirs, and it was a choice between you and John Thaneford. Only you were you, and a real Hildebrand besides. So there you are."

"You mean that I must accept, or let everything go to the younger Thaneford?"

"I'm not a lawyer, but I think it would be that way. He is related by blood, and as my father had no children of his own there are no direct heirs."

A sudden thought presented itself. "How would *you* like it settled?" I asked, audaciously.

"I think that you ought to carry out my father's wishes," she answered, with a simplicity that made me a little ashamed of my disingenuous attempt to inject a purely personal note into the discussion; for the moment I had quite forgotten that this was a house of mourning. Miss Graeme had risen, and I realized that the interview was at an end.

"You will want to go to your room," she said, as we walked out to the entrance hall, our footsteps resounding hollowly upon its marble pavement of alternate white-and-black chequers. She clapped her hands, and a young negro servant presented himself. "Mr. Hildebrand is to have the red room, Marcus," explained Miss Graeme. "Dinner is at seven," she went on. "You won't mind if Eunice and I don't come down. You can have your own meal served in your room, if you

prefer."

"But there is Mr. Thaneford," I suggested. "Also Doctor Marcy."

My cousin Betty frowned. "I suppose they are our guests," she admitted, and I experienced an odd thrill at the feeling of intimacy expressed in that little word, "our."

"I think I had better do the honors in the dining room," I went on.

"I wish you would, then." She stopped at the lower step of the staircase, and held out her hand. "Good night, Cousin Hugh."

Now it is possible to shake hands with hundreds and thousands of people, and find it a perfectly uninteresting operation; it may even be a painful one if you happen to be President of the Republic or the hero of the passing hour. But now and then someone comes along whose hand seems to fit, perhaps too fatally well, and that is different. And so when Betty Graeme slid her slim white hand into mine I knew instantly that it belonged there, always had belonged, and always would. An interesting fact, this, in the natural history of selection, but it has to be recognized by both parties to the transaction before it can be set down as an absolute and accepted truth. It suddenly occurred to me that my Cousin Betty was entirely too frank and cousinly in her behavior to justify any jumping at conclusions. I was naturally exhilarated by the astonishing change in my material fortunes, while she was in sorrow, a sorrow whose full realization still lay before her. I must be patient and wait. Wherefore I returned my Cousin Betty's parting word in kind, and followed Marcus to the red room, where, left alone, I resorted to the childish trick of pinching myself; could this really be I?

Chapter IV

Some Hypothetical Questions

Dinner was not a particularly cheerful meal. I had to take the head of the table, and therefore sat in the chair so lately vacated by my Cousin Francis Graeme. Really I should have preferred a decent delay in the matter, but old Effingham, the family butler for two generations past, would have it so, and any protest would have been both futile and unseemly.

There were three of us at table, for Doctor Marcy was staying on to look after the sick man, and would remain over night in default of the regular nurse, who could not be secured until the next day. I liked the doctor, a blunt, ruddy faced man of forty-five or so. He told me that he was a graduate of Edinburgh, and that he had led an adventurous life for several years after taking his medical degree, including service in the British army during the Boer War. He had a curious scar running down the left side of his jaw and extending nearly to the chin. Naturally I had not commented upon the disfigurement, but somehow the subject of insanity came up, and he told us of a remarkable experience of his hospital days. A patient, subject to periodical fits of mania, was to be operated upon, and Marcy was alone with him in a large room where the instruments were kept. With his hands full of chisels, trephines, and mallets Marcy went to cross the room, and chanced to trip on a rug, falling headlong. Instantly the patient, an English army officer of tremendous physique, was upon him, kicking him in the face with his heavy, double-welted boots. Marcy, fearing that the madman might get hold of the eight-pound mallet, rolled over and flung the whole lot of instruments across the room; thereby he exposed the other side of his head, and the consequence was another terrific kick on the left jaw. With his mouth full of blood and broken teeth Marcy grappled with his man, dragged him to where he could reach a push-button, and held him until help arrived. The curious part of the affair lay in the fact that up to the moment of the fall the patient had been perfectly sane, talkative, and friendly. Marcy's sudden slip and defenseless position had simply unchained the beast in the man. It must have been an Homeric struggle, for Marcy himself, though comparatively short of stature, possessed the most marvelous muscular development I have ever seen, his forearm being bigger than the average man's leg. When I add that, despite his

terrible injuries, Marcy assisted that same afternoon at the operation (which in the end restored the patient to perfect mental health), it will be evident that there was little of the weakling about him; as I have said, I liked him from the start.

John Thaneford ate and talked but little during the meal. He drank several glasses of whiskey and water, and smoked a cigarette between every course. The cloud of his sullen temper was oppressive, and both the doctor and I felt relieved when he abruptly declined coffee, and announced his intention of returning to the sick room. The elder Thaneford still continued in a comatose condition, and really there was nothing to do but wait for whatever change might come; accordingly Doctor Marcy ran upstairs for a hasty look at his patient, and then rejoined me in the library, where coffee and liqueurs had been served.

Effingham had taken his tray and retired to the pantry. Doctor Marcy pulled at his cigar until it glowed redly; then he looked over at me.

"You're Hildebrand of the 'Hundred,' I hear," he began abruptly.

"Yes."

"Consequently you ought to know of something that has been bothering me more than a little. Has it ever been intimated to you that there was anything peculiar about the death of your cousin?"

"Francis Graeme! Why, no; nothing has been said to me."

"Well, I don't think his death was a natural one."

It startled me, the assured manner in which he spoke; in an instant, the atmosphere of this quiet country room seemed to have grown tense and heavy. "Go on," I said briefly.

"As you know," continued Doctor Marcy, "Mr. Graeme died suddenly on Tuesday, June 21, presumably from heart failure or a cerebral hemorrhage. As a matter of record, my routine certificate gives the latter as the cause of death. The fact of a brain lesion was fully established, as I'll explain later, but I'm not at all satisfied as to the predisposing cause."

"Yes."

"You'll understand what I'm driving at when I tell you that I saw Francis Graeme professionally that very morning, and I know that he was in the best of health for

a man of his age. He had been thinking of taking out additional life insurance, and as I am the county examiner for the company, he asked me to drop in Tuesday morning and go over him. Mind you, I had been his regular physician for a number of years, long before he came to the 'Hundred,' and I knew him inside and out. A straighter, cleaner man never lived, and he had always kept himself in top condition; I had never discovered the least sign of any degenerative process.

"Well, I did come over, and I saw him in this very room where we are sitting. He was cheerful as usual, and even joked me on the possibility that I might at last uncover one of the insidious enemies to health that so often make their appearance in middle life. But there was nothing, absolutely nothing—heart, lungs, circulatory system—all in first-class shape. As a matter of form, there would have to be a laboratory analysis, but otherwise I was prepared to give him a clean bill of health, and I told him so. He took it quite as a matter of course, and, after arranging for a round of golf that same afternoon at the Lost River Country Club, we parted. That was around ten o'clock, and at half past two I had a telephone from the 'Hundred,' asking me to come over at once. When I arrived I was taken in here. Graeme lay on the floor, alongside the big library table. On his right temple there was a noticeable contusion, triangular in shape. He was stone dead."

"Could you tell how long?"

"Probably a couple of hours."

"The wound, of course, was your first thought."

"Naturally. And in itself it was quite enough to have caused death. Remember that it was on the temple, a vulnerable spot."

"An assailant then?"

"By hypothesis certainly. I may say that I have had some experience in criminal cases; accordingly I was very careful not to disturb anything, and up to this time I had only touched the man's wrist to assure myself that the pulse was gone."

"Who was it that gave the alarm?"

"I am told that one of the servants, Effingham, to be precise, knocked on the library door at about half past one o'clock, to announce the serving of luncheon. He then went away without waiting for an answer from Mr. Graeme; it seems

that was his custom on the occasion of this particular summons. A half hour later, when Mr. Graeme failed to appear at the table, Miss Trevor told Effingham to go again and make sure that his master had heard the message. I understood that occasionally Graeme would not come to luncheon, especially if he happened to be more than usually busy; he might appear an hour or so later, and forage around for a glass of milk and a couple of biscuits."

"His tardiness then excited no surprise?"

"Apparently not. But Effingham went again to the library, and knocked two or three times without getting any response."

"Must have been very alarming to Miss Graeme."

"Oh, luckily Betty wasn't at home. Miss Trevor was alone in the house, and everything devolved upon her. Finally she decided to have the door broken down, but after she had given the order Effingham reminded her that it would not be necessary. A few months before Graeme had installed a complete system of modern locks throughout the house, and the butler had the master key in his possession."

"That's an interesting point."

"Yes—very. Well, Effingham went to the butler's pantry and got the key."

"Oh, then it was not in his immediate possession after all?"

"I believe he was in the habit of keeping it behind the clock in the pantry instead of with his regular bunch. Of course the idea was that if any of the ordinary keys were lost, or indeed the whole lot of them, he would still have the master key in reserve."

"Do you suppose that anyone else—especially among the other servants—knew about the master-key and where it was kept?"

"Effingham is quite sure that no one did know, but really it's impossible to say. You understand what darkies are—as curious as magpies and quite as lighthanded. If one of them had chanced to see Effingham hiding something behind the clock, he would be sure to investigate for himself at the first convenient opportunity."

"While a clever thief, guessing that a master-key must be in existence, would go

straight to such a prominent object as a clock for his first try. Curious, isn't it, how human nature prefers beaten trails, the old ruts, the obvious grooves in which to run. Take the ordinary small suburban house, with nobody home and everything supposed to be tightly locked up. It's a one-to-three shot, at least, that the front door key will be found neatly tucked away under the mat. But I shouldn't have interrupted."

"The more light the better," nodded the doctor, helping himself to a fresh cigar.

"Where was I? Ah, yes, at the opening of the door. Miss Trevor, so I understand, hung back a little; a woman naturally shrinks from this sort of thing, and Marcus, the house-boy, was the first person to enter. For the instant it seemed as though the room was empty, and Effingham says he heard Marcus exclaim: 'Marse Francis he done gone out!' Then as the boy drew level with the high leather screen, standing at the right of the big desk as one enters the room, he saw the body, yelled in terror, and bolted. Miss Trevor had fainted——"

"When? Exactly when?" I broke in.

"I don't know," returned Marcy. "It may have been before she heard Marcus scream, and it may have been after. I dare say everybody's nerves were pretty tense by this time."

"Well, Effingham seems to have kept his head. He ordered out the other servants, had Miss Trevor carried into the dining room, where she quickly revived, and finally he telephoned for me."

"At Miss Trevor's request?"

"At Miss Trevor's request. That brings us up again to my arrival on the scene, and my first hasty impressions.

"As I have said, Mr. Graeme lay face downward alongside the desk, just hidden by the screen from the gaze of anyone entering the room from the hall. Since the head was turned slightly to the right, the wound was not visible unless one knelt, as I did, directly beside the body.

"Now a wound of this nature could have been received in two easily understandable ways. Either Mr. Graeme, overcome with vertigo, had fallen and hit his head against some sharp corner, or he had been attacked and struck down by a weapon in the hands of some unknown assailant.

"Hypothesis No. 1, or the accident theory. I can state positively that Francis Graeme was not in the least subject to vertigo or fainting spells, and there was nothing to indicate an ordinary trip-up and fall. There is no rug at this point, the floor while smooth is not noticeably slippery, and Graeme was dressed for golf, wearing rubber-soled shoes which must have given him a particularly firm footing. Finally, there was no apparent sharp corner on which his head could have struck. From the position of the body it was clear that he had fallen entirely clear of the writing-desk."

"That seems to dispose of the accident theory."

"Seems to—yes. But it's still a possibility that he might have fallen and struck on something calculated to inflict an injury of this nature, a something which was afterward removed."

"By whom?"

"Who knows? There was time enough for many things to happen between my departure from the house and the discovery of the body. In the meantime no one, supposedly, saw him. So nearly as I can determine, he died a little after twelve o'clock, but the door was not opened until two. A person who knew the house well could have secured the master-key, entered the room, and left it again with little danger of detection."

"It's an impertinent observation, Doctor Marcy, but you say that *no one* saw Mr. Graeme alive after your departure from the library at ten o'clock?"

"Oh, I have my alibi straight enough," smiled the doctor. "Miss Trevor happened to be passing through the hall as I left the room. I stopped and spoke to her, made some jesting remark about Graeme's being good for a thousand years, more or less. At that same moment he came to the library door and waved his hand to us both; then he turned back, and we heard the click of the spring-latch. I believe that he usually set the catch when he wanted to make sure of not being disturbed.

"Now we come to hypothesis No. 2, the possible assailant. The door leading into the hall was locked. There are no roof openings. The windows of stained glass in leaded frames are immovable; otherwise there would be danger of the valuable glass being broken or knocked out through an accidental jar. But for purposes of ventilation there is inserted in each section a pridella. Ah, you don't understand —come over here."

Doctor Marcy conducted me across the room to the window on the right of the fireplace, the one depicting the return of the spies from the land of Canaan. "You will notice," he said, "that there are three panels in the window, each carrying a part of the general picture. Then, in the lower part of the central panel, there is a small subsidiary scene; in this particular case it represents a field of waving wheat in which scarlet poppies are interspersed. This section is technically called the pridella. Being small and exactly square in shape it can be easily hinged. See, I pull the cord that controls the locking-catch—thus—and this small window swings open.

"Tuesday the twenty-first of June was a warm day, and the pridella in each of the large windows was in use. Now the available aperture is about twenty inches by ten, the glass revolving on central pivots. A boy, or a very small man, might possibly squeeze through, but the bottom ledge of the window being some five feet above the terrace level he would have to use a ladder or a pair of steps in order to reach it. Now, as it chanced, that portion of the lawn lying adjacent to the library terrace was in process of being mowed that morning. I saw the men at work, two of the farm negroes. Assuredly they would have noticed any attempt to scale the windows."

"They themselves are quite above suspicion, I suppose."

"Unquestionably. They are elderly men who have been employed at the 'Hundred' all their lives, and who bear excellent characters. Zack is the local colored Baptist preacher, and Zeb is an assistant field overseer. Impossible to suspect either, let alone both."

"Wouldn't they knock off for dinner at noon? Go to their cabins, I mean."

"Ordinarily, yes. But on Tuesday Mandy, Zack's wife, went to Calverton, and didn't return until late in the evening, or afternoon, as you would say. Accordingly she made up pail dinners for both Zack and Zeb, the latter being a boarder in their family. The men ate their food in the shadow of the osage hedge directly opposite the terrace; Effingham saw them and told me so."

"You seem to have covered the ground pretty thoroughly," I observed approvingly.

"And for good reasons, too," remarked the doctor. "For if I really believed the circumstances warranted the step it would be my duty to communicate my suspicions to the coroner."

"Then you haven't done so!" I was surprised and doubtless my voice showed it.

"No," assented Marcy deliberately. "In the first place I was determined to keep every

[Note: There was a misprint here in the book. Instead of the end of this paragraph, the preceding paragraph was duplicated.]

I started; I fancied that I had caught just the faintest suggestion of a sigh. Let me explain that the great room was in darkness except for the circle of yellow light cast by the shaded lamp that stood on a table at my right. I listened intently, but I could hear nothing more.

Chapter V

The Missing Link

"I beg your pardon," repeated Doctor Marcy, looking at me uncertainly.

"I should beg yours, doctor," I answered as easily as I could. Some sixth sense had made me aware that Betty Graeme was standing in the shadow behind me. She must have heard more than enough already, and now she would demand the whole truth. Assuredly I must protect her in her evident desire to remain unnoticed.

"I didn't mean to interrupt," I continued, "but my cigarette was burning my fingers—too much interested, you see."

"Secondly, then," went on Doctor Marcy, "I have found the missing 'something' that serves to link up the chain."

The doctor took a small key from his waist-coat pocket and proceeded to unlock a compartment in the great, flat-topped desk, the latter constructed after the usual design with a set of drawers, and other storage places, on either side of a central well for the accommodation of the writer's feet and legs. From this compartment he unearthed a despatch box made of iron, an old-fashioned piece that might have come down from Revolutionary days. It measured about fifteen inches, by ten, by seven; and the corners were bound in brass.

"Yes, it could have done the business without a doubt," said Marcy, answering my unuttered question. "The box must have been standing on the floor near the screen. Francis Graeme rises, perhaps with the intention of picking it up. He suffers a cerebral rush of blood, becomes dizzy, falls, and strikes his head against this sharp corner. A severe blow in the region of the temple may be instantaneously fatal."

There was a rustle of feminine garments, and my Cousin Betty came from behind the screen and stood before us. "There is only one flaw in your argument, doctor," she said, with just the thin edge of a tremor in her high, sweet voice. "Where was that box when you first came in the room and knelt by my—my father?"

"Sorry you had to know, my girl," said the doctor; he had risen and was standing close to her, holding both her hands in his own big, warm palms. "Sorry you had to know," he repeated. "But since it has come about I shan't be keeping anything back. I wanted to spare you."

"Yes, I understand that," she returned, "and I'm grateful, too. Yet after deciding that an inquest is not necessary, after signing a certificate that death was due to natural causes, you're not satisfied in your own mind. I come in here and find you telling my Cousin Hugh that there is some mystery in the affair, that all is not straight and aboveboard. You even offer a perfectly plausible explanation of what—of what really happened. Yes, and I would have accepted it like everyone else—only for one thing——"

"Yes?" queried the doctor.

"I'll put my question again. Where was that iron despatch-box when you first entered the room, and saw—well, what you saw?"

Doctor Marcy waited a moment or two before replying. "There isn't any doubt in my mind," he began, "but that your father did fall and that the contusion on his forehead was caused by that actual iron box. I confess that I didn't notice it when I first saw the body and knelt down to feel the pulse. I assume that it had been accidentally pushed out of sight in the angle formed by the screen and the desk; it was just there that I found it later on."

"On your second visit to the room?"

"Yes."

"Well, suppose you tell Cousin Hugh what you were doing in the interval. I want to see if his mind will work in the same direction as mine."

"I had stepped into the hall just in time to see you riding up the green drive," said the doctor, "and I realized that someone must prepare you for what had happened. I asked Miss Trevor to do it, but she insisted that she could not go through the ordeal. Consequently, I put Effingham on guard at the library door with instructions to let no one pass; then I went down to the horse-block and assisted you to dismount. You saw instantly that something was wrong, and you begged me to tell you the truth. But I would not say a word until we were in the parlor. Then I admitted that your father had met with an accident. Before I could prevent it you had rushed into the hall and down to the library door."

"Go on," ordered Betty, as he hesitated. "Tell Cousin Hugh who was standing there."

"It was Miss Trevor," said Doctor Marcy, dropping his voice and glancing over at me.

"It wasn't the time to ask for an explanation," continued the doctor. "You remember, Betty, that Eunice took you in her arms, and told you very gently what had happened. She tried to persuade you not to go in the room, but you refused to be put off. Effingham came and unlocked the door; you and I went in and looked at him still lying by the side of the big desk. It was then that I saw the despatch-box, and wondered why I had not noticed it before, especially as it was just the link that I needed to fit into the accident hypothesis."

"I don't think I have any theory," answered Doctor Marcy. "Up to this moment my mind had been more concerned with the stark fact of Graeme's death than with the predisposing cause. Of course I had taken the temple bruise into account, and in a superficial way it seemed to explain everything. But I really hadn't tried to formulate my ideas clearly. The thought of you, Betty, had presented itself, and I was chiefly engaged in wondering how you were to be told and how you would take the shock."

"But afterwards?" persisted Betty.

"Then I tried to build up the accident theory. Everything fitted beautifully except for the little uncertainty about the despatch-box."

"May I ask a question or two," I interrupted.

"Surely."

"You say that you left Effingham to guard the library door while you went to meet my Cousin Betty?"

"Yes."

"How long were you away?"

"Approximately five minutes."

"And when you again came to the library door Miss Trevor was standing there and Effingham was gone?"

"Yes."

"Then it is possible that Miss Trevor may have entered the room—let us say—for the purpose of replacing the despatch-box in its original position?"

"Possible—yes."

"Which implies that she must have paid a previous visit to the room and carried the box away?"

"If you like."

"We assume that the despatch-box held important papers belonging to Mr. Graeme——"

"Including his will," interjected Miss Graeme.

"But I thought that Mr. Eldon——" I began in surprise.

"I was referring to an earlier will," returned my Cousin Betty. "But I forget that you don't know about that. It reads exactly like the present one except that John Thaneford is named as the residual heir."

"Did anyone, besides Mr. Eldon, know that a later will—the one in my favor—had been made?"

"Yes. Father told Eunice and me that he had decided to make the change. He had met you in Philadelphia and liked you. He made inquiries about you and what he heard increased that liking. He had never cared over-much for John, and had considered him only as representing the Hildebrand family, the heirs of the blood. He was delighted to discover that your relationship was quite as close as that of John Thaneford; moreover, you possessed the advantage of bearing the actual name."

"Did Eunice offer any objection to the change?" asked Doctor Marcy.

"Why, no," returned Betty, knitting her brows. "Her advice in the matter had not been asked, and she would hardly have offered it. I don't remember that she said anything at all."

"How about you?"

Betty colored. "I did suggest to father that he needn't be in such a hurry," she answered. And then with a quick glance at me: "You see, Cousin Hugh, none of

us had met you outside of father himself. You might be very nice and probably were, but the acquaintance had been so short, and he might have been deceived. We women tried to persuade him that he had been a little hasty; we wanted him to wait until you had paid that projected visit to the 'Hundred' and given us the chance to look you over."

"We!" put in the doctor significantly. "So it appears that Eunice did take a hand in the discussion."

"Oh, in that way—why, yes. We felt exactly alike about it, knowing that father was apt to be too generous in his estimate of the people he met; he had been cheated so many times."

I began to feel a trifle embarrassed, and Betty, in that wonderful way of hers, divined it instantly. Not that she said anything. She just looked at me again, and I understood that I need no longer consider myself rated as a doubtful quantity; a mightily cheering thought I found it.

"Was Eunice persistent in her endeavor to change Mr. Graeme's resolution?" asked Doctor Marcy.

"You mean about cutting out John and putting in Mr. Hugh Hildebrand?"

"Yes."

"Persistent! Well, I dare say you could have called it that," replied Betty thoughtfully. "She certainly said several times that John Thaneford believed himself entitled to the property; she pointed out that when father succeeded his cousin, Richard Hildebrand, he had as much as promised to make such disposition of the 'Hundred.'"

"Which he really had done," I suggested. "The first will was in existence; only now he proposed to alter it."

"Yes."

"Suppose Mr. Graeme had died intestate," I went on. "What then?"

"I dare say the real property would have gone to Betty as his legally adopted daughter," answered Doctor Marcy.

"No, not legally," explained Betty, much to our surprise. "My name is really Graeme, but it comes to me from my own father who was Francis Graeme's

older brother. I was only a baby when my parents died, and my uncle simply took charge of me. It didn't seem necessary to take out formal adoption papers, and anyhow it was never done."

"Oh, undoubtedly there would have been a lawsuit, in the event of no will," remarked the doctor. "Both Betty and John Thaneford could put in the claim of blood relationship; you, too, Mr. Hildebrand, if it comes to that. Bear in mind there is no entail."

"Was Mr. John Thaneford aware that there had been a will drawn in his favor?" I asked.

"I can't say, Cousin Hugh. Probably not, for even I never heard of it until father announced that he intended to supersede it."

"When did that particular conversation take place?"

"To-day is Thursday; just a week ago then."

"Mr. Graeme himself may have spoken to Thaneford."

"About what?" put in Doctor Marcy. "The making of the first will, or the fact that he had determined to alter it?"

"Well, he might have told him the whole story."

The doctor shook his head. "I doubt it very much," he said. "Graeme had grown to dislike John Thaneford—dislike him intensely."

"Why?"

Doctor Marcy did not reply in words, but eyebrows rose significantly as he glanced in Betty's direction.

"Confining ourselves to facts," continued the doctor, "it can be established that a will was made in favor of John Thaneford, and that Mr. Graeme had determined to set it aside. That first will was kept by Mr. Graeme in this very despatch-box; it is there now."

Doctor Marcy selected another small key from his bunch, and opened the iron box. "You know I am a co-executor with Henry Powers," he said, "and so I am acting within my rights." He took out a number of legal papers, and presently offered one for our inspection. It was a testamentary document precisely like the

will read by Mr. Eldon, except that the residuary estate went to John Thaneford instead of Hugh Hildebrand. It was dated some six months back.

"And was the second will, the one in my favor, also kept in this box?" I asked.

"No," answered Doctor Marcy. "Mr. Eldon, who of course drew it, had retained it in his own possession. You see, it had only been executed a few days ago; to be exact, the Friday before Mr. Graeme's death. Perhaps Mr. Eldon persuaded Mr. Graeme to let him keep it locked up in the office safe, at least temporarily."

"Yet someone, who knew Mr. Graeme's habits and about this despatch-box, may have come to the conclusion that the new will was kept in the same place as the old one."

Doctor Marcy nodded. "It follows," he said meditatively, "that on the morning of June 21 'someone' obtained possession of the master-key and entered the library with a definite purpose in view, a purpose identified with the contents of that iron despatch-box. That is your idea?"

"And the obvious criticism is that the master-key would hardly have been used at a time when Mr. Graeme was actually occupying the room."

"Well, 'someone' may have expected to find the tragical situation which we know existed; a forewarning had been received that there would be no human obstacle to the search for the iron despatch-box. Whereupon the entrance was made and the box was found. There was no attempt to examine its contents on the spot."

"Why not?"

"There was danger in remaining in the room, and the papers were too numerous to be sorted out at a glance. Or some outside disturbance may have occurred to frighten the intruder. At any rate, 'someone' withdrew, taking the despatch-box along for leisurely examination."

"Then it was not this 'someone' who killed Mr. Graeme," I remarked.

"No one ever intimated it," returned the doctor. "Remember that Graeme sat with his back to the fireplace and windows, and facing the entrance door. It would not be easy for 'someone' to unlock the door, pass to the vicinity of the writing desk, and strike the fatal blow—all without attracting the attention of the victim. Now no sounds of a struggle were heard by anyone, and there was nothing in the disposition of the body to suggest a physical encounter. No, you can't get away

from the plain and simple facts: Mr. Graeme is taken with vertigo; he staggers and falls; his temple comes into contact with the sharp corner of that iron despatch-box; he becomes unconscious immediately, and shortly afterwards he dies. What more do you want to know?"

"So that is what killed him?"

"If I were perfectly convinced of the truth of my own theory," returned the doctor, "would I have ever intimated to you, Mr. Hildebrand, that there was something odd about the business? Betty put her finger at once upon what had been vaguely in my mind. *Where was that despatch-box when I first entered the room and found Francis Graeme lying dead upon the floor?* I don't know, do you?"

"There ought to be an inquest," I declared. "And of course an autopsy. You are willing?" I asked, turning to Betty.

"Yes."

"Then it is decided. Who is the coroner, Doctor Marcy?"

"John Thaneford."

For a moment I thought the doctor guilty of execrably bad taste in making a joke of the matter; then I saw that he was in sober earnest. "For some extraordinary reason," he explained, "Thaneford took it into his head to try the political game. The local Democratic slate had already been made up, but he was told that he could have one of the minor offices. Accordingly, he accepted the nomination for coroner and was elected by the usual party majority."

"Well, he is sworn to do his duty," I persisted.

"Surely."

"Suppose we present what evidence we have to-morrow, including, of course, the withdrawal of your original death certificate, Doctor Marcy."

"It may get me into all sorts of trouble," commented the doctor ruefully. "But there's nothing else to be done; I see that clearly. The bare thought that Francis Graeme, he of all men—sorry, Betty, my girl! I dare say this is getting a bit too much for you."

My cousin Betty had broken down and was crying softly on Doctor Marcy's

broad shoulder; he petted her and talked to her as though she had been a little child.

And so at last we parted for the night, Doctor Marcy taking up his quarters in an anteroom adjoining the sick chamber, and Betty deciding to seek companionship with Miss Trevor. I tumbled into bed at once, but it was many an hour before sleep came to me.

Chapter VI

"*Madame Colette Marinette.*"

Dr. Marcy was the first person to join me in the breakfast room the following morning. To my surprise, he informed me that Mr. Fielding Thaneford had passed a comfortable night and was better. "Of course I am speaking in comparative terms," he added. "The old man has had a stroke of apoplexy. He is partially paralyzed on the right side, and his power of speech is gone entirely. He cannot recover, but he may linger on for some time."

"A week?"

"Perhaps longer. It is impossible to say—and here comes John."

The younger Thaneford favored us with a short nod and an unintelligible word, and demanded of Effingham a full pot of coffee, strong and hot. I made some obligatory enquiries, in my capacity of host, but my unwelcome guest gave me only the curtest of replies. Nevertheless I felt sufficiently large-minded to make allowances. After all, the man had received two pretty severe blows, in the loss of his inheritance and in the strickening of his father; and it could not be pleasant for him to be accepting my hospitality.

Doctor Marcy waited until Thaneford had finished his breakfast; then he bluntly asked for the holding of an inquest on Francis Graeme's death. "I formally withdraw the medical certificate," he continued, "on the ground that new evidence has come to light."

"What new evidence?" inquired John Thaneford, his beetling eyebrows contracting angrily.

"I'll submit it to your jury," retorted the doctor.

There was no further discussion of the main point. Legally it was for Thaneford alone to decide upon the necessity for an inquest, and for a moment or two I thought he looked disinclined to give in. Then, apparently, he changed his mind. "You don't seem to have much confidence in your own medical opinions," he said nastily. "But I'm as anxious as anybody to ferret out the truth behind this

business. And possibly we may get some light upon the making of that remarkable will. I take it that Mr. Hugh Hildebrand will offer no objection." I made no answer to the taunt, and Thaneford went to the telephone to call his jurors together.

It was not until two days later that the members of the jury were finally assembled at the "Hundred." Two of them were neighboring farmers; there were also a couple of small business men from Calverton. The fifth man was a Mr. Chalmers Warriner, a chemist and the head of the experimental department of the Severn Optical Glass Works; and, greatly to my surprise, I was ordered by the coroner to take the sixth and last place in the panel. All of my associates had known Francis Graeme personally, and it was apparent that the unusual circumstance of the holding of the inquest after the interment had aroused curiosity and no small amount of speculation.

By direction of the coroner the body had been exhumed and an autopsy performed. The expert examination had been made by Dr. Clayton Williams of the Johns Hopkins Medical School, and he was the first witness called.

Doctor Williams told the jury that while the wound on the temple might have been sufficient to cause death still he was not prepared to pronounce positively upon the point. In answer to a question from Professor Warriner, Doctor Williams went on to say that the autopsy had revealed a very peculiar condition of the brain—a lesion of most unusual character.

"Not necessarily caused by the blow on the temple?" asked Warriner.

"I do not think so," answered the witness.

"Can you assign a cause?"

"I have never seen anything quite like it, Mr. Warriner. In consequence, I haven't any theory of causation to advance."

"But you must have come to some conclusions," persisted Warriner.

"All I can say is that the degenerative process observed by me resembled that induced by sunstroke, but on a greatly intensified scale. It is possible, of course, that Mr. Graeme may have had some obscure brain disease, and that it had progressed to a critical stage quite unsuspected by himself, or even by his medical advisers."

"You mean," continued Warriner, "that the deceased may have had a sudden seizure, resulting in his falling from his chair and striking his head upon the corner of that iron despatch-box placed in evidence by Doctor Marcy?"

"It is possible."

"Then it is a perfectly plain case?"

"I'm not so sure about that," returned Doctor Williams. "The brain lesion may have killed him before he fell; the superficial injury may have no importance whatever. Or the wound may have been caused by a weapon in the hands of another person."

"But there is no question of another person," put in John Thaneford.

There was nothing more of a tangible character to be obtained from the testimony of the medical gentlemen; for Doctor Marcy could only reiterate his belief that Francis Graeme had appeared to be in perfect health on that fatal morning. Of course there had been no opportunity for the usual laboratory tests, but his physical condition could not have been precarious; that was unthinkable. There were just two factors in evidence—the internal lesion and the external injury. Which was the predetermining cause, and which was the final effect? Or was it that neither fact had any real relation to the death of Francis Graeme? No one could say, and Doctor Williams was finally permitted to retire. I fancied that the saturnine countenance of Coroner Thaneford showed a secret satisfaction in the apparent confusion of testimony.

The customary depositions were taken from the house servants, but they added little or nothing to our stock of knowledge. Effingham, the butler, was asked to explain his five minutes' absence from sentry duty at the library door while Doctor Marcy was engaged in meeting Miss Graeme. He answered very simply that Miss Eunice Trevor had sent him to her dressing-room for smelling-salts and a bottle of aromatic spirits of ammonia. When questioned about the master-key he declared that no one knew of its hiding place behind the clock in the pantry; he did not believe that it had been touched until he had taken it himself, shortly before two o'clock, for the purpose of unlocking the library door. Finally Doctor Marcy told the jury of the peculiar circumstances concerning the iron despatch-box. But he could not positively affirm that the box was not in the room when he first examined the body; he was obliged to admit that he might have merely overlooked its presence.

John Thaneford turned to the jury. "Is there any use in going on with the inquiry?" he asked. "I don't believe we can do more than return a non-committal verdict—dead by the visitation of God, or something like that."

"Or alternatively, by the act of party or parties unknown," interpolated Warriner.

"Don't see why you should say that," retorted Thaneford, scowling darkly.

"Well, Doctor Marcy has pointed out the unexplained disappearance of the iron despatch-box; I mean between his first and second visit to the room. I think we ought to make sure that no other person entered the library in the interim, or had the opportunity and means to do so."

"Just what do you want?" demanded Thaneford truculently.

"Let's have Effingham back again," said Warriner calmly. "I want to ask some questions that I didn't think of before."

There could be no valid objection to this procedure; and, accordingly, the coroner directed that the negro butler should be recalled.

While we were waiting Warriner had risen and was walking about the room, examining its details with profound attention. He was particular in assuring himself that the main windows could not be opened, and that the apertures provided by the swinging of the pridellas on their pivots were impracticable to anyone except a really small boy. When Effingham reappeared Warriner took the examination into his own hands.

"Now, Effingham," he began, "I want to know everything about this room. Are there any traps leading to the cellar, any scuttle-panels in the dome?"

"Nossir. It am tight all roun'—like um bottle. Doan know nuffin' 'bout traps and scuttles."

"Undoubtedly correct," commented Warriner, looking around at us. "I have tested the floor pretty thoroughly, and it is solid everywhere. The same, I think, may be said of the dome and ceiling—not the sign of a crack or jointure." He turned savagely on Effingham. "Now tell me, you black scoundrel, where the secret door is?"

Effingham's countenance of shining ebony took on the ashy tinge peculiar to his race under the emotional stress of fright or duress. "Nebber heard of 'im," he said

quickly, and relapsed into wary silence.

"You know me," continued Warriner, "and what I can put on you if you don't obey me and answer my questions. Where is it?"

Effingham's knees shook in visible terror. Professor Warriner enjoyed a wide reputation among the colored folk as a dealer in "cunjers" and other forbidden arts; was not his physical laboratory the veritable anteroom to the infernal regions. The old negro, torn between superstitious fears and his inherited sense of loyalty to the Hildebrand family, trembled and gasped as he tried to face his terrible inquisitor. "Whuffer you pick on ole Effingham?" he protested feebly. "I doan know nuffin 'bout any secret doah."

"Do what the gentleman tells you, Effingham." The voice was quiet and controlled, and yet there was an undertone of emotional vibration in it; I turned and saw Miss Trevor, who had entered the room unbidden and unannounced. I thought that John Thaneford looked both angry and dismayed, but he did not attempt to exercise his official authority.

"Yessum," returned Effingham with cheerful alacrity. Since one of the ladies of the family had assumed the responsibility it was not for him to offer any further objection. He went over to the right side of the great fireplace and touched a spring in the paneling; a door, just high and wide enough to accommodate an ordinary sized person, swung open.

"Nothing very romantic about this door," commented Miss Trevor. "It is merely a short cut to the terrace and gardens, besides being a convenient means of avoiding uncongenial visitors. But I don't think Mr. Graeme often used it, and none of the servants, except Effingham, are even aware of its existence."

We all crowded around the secret entrance. The short passage turned sharply to the left behind the massive bulk of the chimney breast; we caught just a glimpse of a second and outer door, strongly built and banded with stout iron.

Warriner stepped forward and entered the passage, reappearing almost immediately. "The outside door is unlocked," he said. "But that doesn't prove anything of itself. Before proceeding further I think it would be wise to examine the exterior situation."

I happened to catch Miss Trevor's eye, and I could have sworn that a spark of relief-cum-triumph burned there for the infinitesimal part of a second. We

trooped into the hall and left the house in order to gain the library terrace.

There was the door, cleverly masked by vines, in a corner of the chimney stack. Moreover, its wooden surface had been veneered with stucco, colored and lined to simulate the brick of the chimney; the deception was quite good enough to pass casual inspection.

"The vines don't count for much," said Warriner. "Easy to push them aside. But hullo! what's that?"

Plastered squarely on the line of the door opening was the empty cocoon of a moth. It was perfectly evident that the door could not have been opened without destroying the fragile structure, and of course it must have been fixed in position months before to give time for the transformation of the pupa into the perfect insect. That seemed to settle the question of either entrance or exit for a period long antedating the death of Francis Graeme.

"Pretty conclusive testimony," remarked Warriner. "I take it we're all witness to the fact, and so if no one has any objection——" And then, before a protest could have been voiced, he coolly picked off the cocoon and dropped it into his pocket.

When we were reassembled in the library John Thaneford again suggested that we might proceed to the formality of a verdict; he pointed out that there was no shred of evidence connecting any definite person with the tragedy. But once more Warriner was ready with a counter-proposal; he wanted to examine the two negroes who were working on the south lawn between those fateful hours of noon and two o'clock on the twenty-first of June.

"But Doctor Marcy has their positive assurance," urged Thaneford, "that no stranger was seen about the place that day. Isn't that so, doctor?" he continued, turning to Marcy.

Doctor Marcy nodded. "Yes, and I've known both men all my life," he said. "I can vouch for them as being perfectly straight."

"Better have them in and get their evidence on the record at first hand," persisted Warriner.

There was incontrovertible reason in this, and Zack and Zeb were sent for. John Thaneford still looked like a thunder cloud, and I found it difficult to make up my mind. Was he annoyed at the masterful way in which his official authority

was being usurped, or was he inwardly anxious to keep the inquiry within conventional bounds; was it even possible that he was seeking to shield somebody? His personal skirts must be clear, for it was positively established that he had been at "Thane Court" the entire day of June the twenty-first. Being a relative, the tidings of Mr. Graeme's death had been sent to him by telephone, and he had replied that he would come immediately to the "Hundred." But he had not put in an appearance until the next morning. The one suspicious circumstance was his willingness, almost eagerness, to accept Doctor Marcy's certificate without making any investigation on his own account, coupled with his subsequent reluctance to reopen the inquiry. Finally, his attitude throughout the inquest had been restless and perfunctory; it could be easily seen that the exercise of his duty as coroner was most distasteful to him. But I was keenly aware that I did not like John Thaneford; all the more reason that I should not do him any injustice. And so I kept my cogitations to myself.

Zack and Zeb proved to be model witnesses under Warriner's skilful tutelage. It was positively determined that no stranger had been near the library terrace between eleven and two o'clock on the day in question.

"Or anybody else?" asked Warriner.

"Miss Eunice she done come by thar; walkin' up fum de gyarding," answered Zeb.

"What time was that?"

"Ah reckon 'bout one o'clock, sah."

"How do you know? Do you carry a watch?"

"Nossah, but de oberseer's bell for de fiel' hands just done rung," asserted the witness with conviction.

"Where did Miss Trevor go?"

"I doan know, sah. I speck she went plum into de manshun house—roun' de cornah, sah."

Zack could add nothing more to this statement, and Zeb, when called in his turn, merely produced corroborative testimony.

"I think we had better see Miss Trevor herself," said Warriner, after Zeb had

bowed and scraped his way out.

"All damned nonsense," objected Thaneford, looking uglier than ever. "And I must say, Mr. Warriner, that you are taking a great deal too much on yourself. I'm the coroner, and I know my duty."

Warriner stuck to his guns, and he was backed up by a juryman named Orton, a well-to-do farmer and an unusually intelligent man, as it seemed to me. Thaneford finally yielded ungracious assent and Miss Trevor again entered the room. As she stood confronting us I was struck by the intense pallor of her skin, when contrasted with the coal blackness of her hair and her sombre apparel of mourning. Yet she appeared perfectly collected and self-possessed; she admitted readily that she had been on the library terrace at the approximate hour of one o'clock; she explained that she had gone to the walled garden to cut some flowers for the luncheon table; she had returned by the terrace as that was the shortest way to the front door; she had entered the house, and, after arranging the flowers, she had retired to her own room. Warriner put a question or two relative to her taking Effingham's post at the library door while Doctor Marcy was endeavoring to break the news to Betty; her answers were definite and given without hesitation. Yes, she had sent the servant upstairs to get the smelling salts and the ammonia; she had thought the restoratives might be needed. Her account of the finding of the body agreed perfectly with the story told by Doctor Marcy.

"Thank you, Miss Trevor," said Warriner. "Just one more question. What sort of flowers did you cut on your visit to the garden?"

"Yellow roses. I think the variety is called *Madame Colette Marinette*."

Upon Miss Trevor's retirement the verdict was taken. It was unanimous and to the effect that Francis Hildebrand Graeme had come to his death through the visitation of God.

The jurymen climbed into their surreys and Fords and took their departure. Warriner lingered behind, and a few minutes later he joined me on the porch, where I was smoking a long longed-for cigarette. Miss Trevor had gone upstairs, and John Thaneford had betaken himself to the sick-room; we were entirely alone.

"I found this in the passage behind the secret door," he said, and handed me the withered remains of what had been a magnificent yellow rose.

"Interesting exhibit, isn't it," he went on dryly.

"You don't—you don't mean?" I stammered.

"I'm not very much up on floriculture, but this particular variety happens to be one of my favorites. The florists call it——"

"Yes?"

"*Madame Colette Marinette*."

Chapter VII

The Whispering Gallery

The long afternoon went by, but we had accomplished nothing more than the consumption of an unlimited amount of tobacco.

"Certainly not convincing evidence," said Warriner with a final shrug of his shoulders. "Still my yellow rose is worth preserving along with the moth cocoon," and he put the pathetic dead flower carefully away in his empty cigarette case. For a minute or two the silence remained unbroken.

"I wonder if you would mind spending a few days here at the 'Hundred?'" I blurted out; suddenly I was aware that I had taken a strong liking to Chalmers Warriner.

"I've no end of things on hand," he answered, smiling cordially, "but I'll see what I can do. Suppose I run into Calverton, look over my mail, and return here around ten o'clock."

"It would be a great kindness," I said heartily. We shook hands, and he jumped into his perfectly appointed cross-country car and drove away. Yes, I did like Chalmers Warriner very much, and he seemed to have a head on him.

Doctor Marcy also left us. His patient had continued to improve, and of course he had his other practice to look after.

It was a pleasanter dinner than that of the night before inasmuch as John Thaneford was at "Thane Court," while Miss Trevor pleaded a headache and had tea and toast served in her room. But there was my Cousin Betty Graeme to do the honors of my board—how strange it still seemed to use the possessive pronoun!—with all possible grace and dignity. Also I had the pleasure of welcoming a new addition to the household, a Mrs. Anthony, an old family friend and Betty's godmother to boot. Circumstances had prevented her attendance at the funeral, but she had reached the "Hundred" at last, to Betty's infinite comfort and satisfaction. Mrs. Anthony was a delightful old person, with the figure of a young girl and the flashing eyes and snowy bob curls of a French marquise. I did myself the honor of kissing the small hand extended to me, and

was taken into favor at once.

Yes, we were an entirely congenial dinner party. We spoke of Francis Graeme several times, and without the least embarrassment or restraint; quite as though he might return at any moment to resume his rightful place in the circle. And more and more I came to realize that I had lost a great deal in not knowing him sooner and better. A good and gallant gentleman! who was I that I should presume to stand in his shoes. Even now I am beginning to perceive that a great inheritance has its burdens as well as its privileges; I see that it is no small thing to become Hildebrand of the "Hundred."

The ladies retired early, and a few minutes after ten Warriner redeemed his promise by making a welcome appearance. I told him that I had some necessary letters to write, and that I should not make company of him; he was to consider himself entirely at home. He nodded acquiescently and spent some twenty minutes in wandering about the library; then he settled down with a book.

It really was imperative that I should acquaint certain people—my quasi-partner Anstruthers, the Mercers and others—with the great change that had taken place in my life and fortunes; my affairs in town would have to be wound up, and it might be a fortnight before I could get to Philadelphia. My correspondence proved more lengthy than I had anticipated, and it was long after midnight when I had sealed and stamped the last enclosure. Warriner threw down his book, and I crossed the room and joined him. "By way of resting our eyes," I said, and thereupon I extinguished the only light in the room, an Argand-burner oil lamp. We exchanged half a dozen desultory sentences, and then relapsed into that intimate silence which is only possible between real friends. For perhaps half an hour we sat quietly thinking and smoking; then——

"There is nothing I can say or do; understand?"

I recognized the rough, forbidding quality of John Thaneford's voice, and instantly I was all attention. Of course he must be speaking to somebody; who could it be? Presently the answer came. But it was not in words; all I could make out were sounds of weeping and smothered sobs, unmistakably feminine in character.

Now I should have explained that Warriner and I had been sitting close to one of the side walls of the library; indeed our heads were almost in actual contact with the plaster. Thaneford and his companion were undoubtedly in the great hall whose circular walls probably formed a natural whispering gallery. How the

sounds could be transmitted through the straight connecting passage under the stairs, and then shunted upon the rectangular walls of the library, was a problem in applied acoustics that I did not attempt to solve. The conversation was being conducted under the breath, as we say, but every word fell with perfect distinctness upon my ears. Of course it was a private conversation, one to which I had no right to listen. I did make a motion to pull away from the wall, possibly with the vague idea of uttering a warning admonition to these indiscreet chatterers, but Warriner's ready hand pushed me back in my chair; he laid his finger upon my lips, and I had no option but to yield to his stronger will. This was war, war in which all is fair.

"You've made a mess of it, my girl," went on Thaneford, "and I can't stop to help clear it up. That's flat."

"You mean that you won't keep your promise?" The words were low and thick with emotion; I could not seem to recognize the ownership of the voice.

"No, I don't say that at all. But I'm up to my neck at 'Thane Court,' and I was counting upon the 'Hundred' to pull me out. Give me half a chance and I'll do the square thing—by you and everybody."

"What more do you want of me?"

"Just keep your eyes and ears open. I saw Grimes to-day, and he thinks there is a fair possibility of breaking the will—*non compos*, you know. Why think of it! Francis Graeme never saw this Yankee Hildebrand but once in his life, and then for a couple of hours only. It stands to reason that a man in his right senses doesn't hand over a fortune as though it were nothing more than a Key West cigar. Grimes advises me to fight, and I'd like nothing better than to do it. But fighting costs a lot of money," he concluded gloomily.

"You know that if I had it——"

"All I know is that you haven't got it," he interrupted coldly. "For heaven's sake! don't let us get sentimental again."

There was a brief silence, and then came a badly suppressed yawn, coupled with a declaration that the speaker was dog-tired and ready to fall asleep standing up. We could hear retreating footsteps, and the occasional creaking of a loose board in the tread of the staircase; then all was quiet again.

"Eunice Trevor, of course," announced Warriner meditatively.

"I should never have known her voice," I protested.

"Exactly so. And for the very sufficient reason that she is accustomed to riding under double-wraps, as the hunting men say. A cold, calculating, iceberg sort of creature—that's the way you've thought of her."

"Dare say you're right."

"But deep in the heart of the iceberg there burns a flame, glowing and intense. Now and then it melts its way out, and for a few minutes there are gorgeous fireworks. That was the young woman's natural voice, and she was improving the infrequent opportunity of using it by letting herself go."

"What do you think——" I began.

"I don't think at all," he broke in. "At least for to-night. In the morning my brain may begin to function again, but it refuses to be squeezed any further at present."

"They've had their five minutes grace," remarked Warriner, after another brief pause, "and I'm off to bed. Good night." Warriner seemed to melt away and become part of the surrounding darkness; after a minute or two I followed, and reached my room without further incident.

Again my night's rest was a troubled one.

Chapter VIII

Adventuring on "Sugar Loaf"

It was a glorious summer morning, and as I descended the staircase I could look through the wide opened door and see the rolling acres of "Hildebrand Hundred" lying gracious and fair under a cloudless sky. Bees were humming among the flowers, and a whiff of new mown hay drifted in on a vagrant breeze. Yes, this old world is a pretty pleasant place to live in, provided of course that one doesn't make a tactical mistake and settle down too far East or West, as the case may be. But given the right place and the right people, and existence on this planet may be very comfortable indeed.

Nobody seemed to be around, although it was nearly nine o'clock, and I walked into the library. There I found Chalmers Warriner bending over a large glazed case which stood in a remote corner of the room.

"Good morning," he smiled. "I've been amusing myself in looking over the collection of butterflies and moths made by your predecessor, old Richard Hildebrand. I believe it is considered valuable."

I glanced carelessly at the rows of inanimate insects fixed in their painful museum attitudes. There can be no quarrelling with tastes, but mine do not run in this direction. I made some perfunctory assent to Warriner's glowing encomiums upon the quality of Uncle Richard's *magnum opus* (it seems that our good Chalmers is himself an amateur of distinction in entomological science), and then haled him off for breakfast.

Quite naturally we drifted back to the library. It was the pleasantest and most homelike room in the house, a characteristic that persisted for all that the shadow of a possible tragedy still rested there. But after all, men must die somewhere, some time, and it would be impracticable to transform every death chamber into a mortuary chapel. Death is a natural process; why try to invest it with unnatural terror. "My dear," said a very old woman to her blooming goddaughter, "you will some day come to know that old age needs and desires death just as youth needs and desires sleep."

Warriner started immediately upon a close and systematic examination of the

apartment and its appurtenances. From his pocket he drew a geologist's hammer and a slender rod of steel, and for nearly an hour he occupied himself in probing the wainscoting and walls and in making test knocks. I had expected to see him give particular attention to the secret passage behind the fireplace, but he ignored it entirely. I expressed some surprise.

"It's told me already all it had to tell," he answered, and did not vouchsafe any further elucidation of his pronouncement. Nor did I ask for it; I realized that a man should be allowed to work in his own way.

Finally, Warriner asked me to sit down in the fixed revolving chair that stood before the great, flat-topped library desk. I did so with some inward reluctance, for this was the seat *par excellence* of the master of "Hildebrand Hundred"; from this very coign of vantage Francis Graeme had toppled to his death. But as well now as ever, and accordingly I complied with the request.

At Warriner's further suggestion I bent forward as though engaged in writing. Suddenly he appeared from behind the screen of stamped Spanish leather which stood between the table and the door leading to the great hall; instantly, I became aware of his presence; involuntarily I looked up.

"Not so easy to surprise a man from this side, even if he were engaged in writing or study," mused Warriner as he walked over to the fireplace.

"Now suppose I had entered from this secret postern or side door," he went on. "I should have no particular difficulty in stealing up behind you and striking a fatal blow."

"Perhaps not," I assented. "The rug is deeply piled, and a man would have to walk pretty heavily to be heard."

"A man—or a woman," amended Warriner. Of course I understood him, but it was none of my business to prejudice Eunice Trevor's case. The very fact that I instinctively disliked her imposed its obligations.

Warriner motioned me to yield him the revolving chair, and I arose with alacrity. He sat down quite as though intent upon testing the smoothness of the swivelling and the depth and comfort of the upholstery. But presently he swung round and faced the fireplace and windows. Then he drew from his pocket a pair of French folding opera glasses and continued his observations for several minutes; finally, he glanced at me and beckoned. I went over to the big desk.

"From where I sit," began Warriner, "I can see an odd-appearing break in the woods on 'Sugar Loaf.' Take the chair and I'll explain what I have in mind."

I obeyed and Warriner leaned over my shoulder, pointing. "Look straight," he said, "through that small, square panel in the window on the left of the fireplace; it is called the pridella, I believe. Now take the glasses."

The window was the one depicting the rebellion of the sons of Korah; it was a vivid representation of the earth opening under the feet of the guilty men, and was brilliant with yellow and crimson flames arising from the abyss. Through the open pridella I could see "Sugar Loaf," the latter a hill of a peculiar conical shape that rose directly from the meadows watered by the little river Whippany. Its distance from the house was about half a mile, and it was covered with a dense growth of oaks and beeches.

Now that I had the glasses focussed I understood what Warriner was driving at. Framed in the square of the pridella was a small opening in the leafy wall; it looked as though a shelf had been cut out of the cliff face, and evidently with a purpose. But what sort of a purpose? "An observation post," I hazarded.

Warriner nodded. "Something like that was in my own mind," he said. "What do you say to our walking over there and making a reconnaissance?"

"Just as you like," I assented. "Anyway it will be a pleasant stroll."

Supplying ourselves with the primal necessities of stout sticks and brierwood pipes we set out. Gyp, an Irish terrier, looked longingly upon us, and Warriner, after a momentary hesitation, told him that he might accompany the expedition; whereupon there followed much staccato yelping and the apparent vision of one small dog in several places at once.

The side of the hill facing the "Hundred" was rather too steep for comfortable climbing; moreover, there seemed to be a wagon road, on the right hand slope, which promised a practicable means of ascent. We walked across the lawn and a horse paddock to the Whippany, following the bank of the stream to where it was crossed by a picturesque stone bridge. Straight on lay the road to Lynn C. H., while our woodland way branched off to the left.

It was pleasantly cool in the woods, and inside of twenty minutes we were well up on the hillside, and the library wing of the "Hundred" was in plain view. But there was still no sign of "Warriner's Shelf," as I chose to dub it, and I began to

chaff him gently. However Gyp, by way of repaying the favor of being allowed to join us, pushed an inquisitive nose into a mass of tangled wild grapevines. Here was plain token of human progress, and we followed the narrow trail that presently dipped down sharply and then around the shoulder of a big, square rock.

"Warriner's Shelf" at last, a natural bench in the escarpment, not larger than ten feet by six, with a comparatively level floor, and partially sheltered by the overhanging rock wall. The bushes and foliage in general had been cut away in front, leaving an irregular opening about the height of a man and four or five feet in width. "I should never have picked it out in the world," said Warriner, "but for that glint of white." And as he spoke, he detached from a hazel twig a square of cambric, a man's handkerchief. I followed the direction of his glance, and read the initials in one corner—"J. T."

"What do you make of it?" I asked, feeling more than a little puzzled.

"A signal, of course. A sharp eye could pick it out from the terrace, particularly if a hand was waving it."

"Anyhow it is proof that John Thaneford knows of this eyrie and is accustomed to visit it," I added.

"Perfectly. Do you realize, by the way, that we are now on Thaneford property?"

"How so?"

"The dividing line runs a few yards away, and you will find a monument near the base of that white pine. I came up here once with old Richard Hildebrand, and he pointed it out to me. This side of Sugar Loaf belongs to 'Thane Court.'"

"Then we are trespassers."

"In the technical sense I suppose we are."

"And John Thaneford doesn't welcome visitors," I remarked, recalling the incidents of our first meeting.

"Well, we're only looking around; no harm done."

Warriner reloaded his pipe leisurely. "What do you suppose is the meaning of that contraption?" he continued, indicating a singular framework of iron, painted green, that stood in the opening and pointed directly toward the house; we both

examined it with keen attention.

It consisted of a narrow trough of metal—probably the half section of a four-inch pipe—and was some three feet in length. It was supported by tripods at either end, firmly fixed in the ground. The whole arrangement was solidly put together, and seemed intended as a rest for some sort of instrument. Warriner seated himself on a flat stone, and sighted along the trough. Then he supplemented his observations with the binoculars.

"It appears to line exactly with the pridella opening of the 'Korah' window," he said at length. "Adjust a high-powered rifle in the trough, and it ought to be possible to send a bullet directly into the library at the 'Hundred'; yes, and it would strike pretty close to anyone who happened to be occupying the swivel-chair at the big teakwood desk. Of course, without instruments, I can't speak definitely about the trajectory, but we must be a couple of hundred feet above the house which should compensate for the natural drop in the arc."

"The fatal objection to that theory," I retorted, "is the non-existent bullet. There can't be the slightest ground for thinking that Francis Graeme came to his death through the agency of a gunshot wound."

"No, there isn't," admitted Warriner. "All the same, it opens up some interesting possibilities."

"For example?" A third person was suddenly taking part in the conversation.

I turned quickly to see John Thaneford standing besides us. He was accompanied by a big collie, an ill-tempered brute, who eyed Gyp with disdainful truculence. The like adjectival description might have been applied to Thaneford himself as he stood there with his white teeth just showing through the close drawn lips, and one muscular fist, with its tufted knuckles, knotted about a blackthorn cudgel.

"You were speaking, I think, of interesting possibilities," he continued, looking at each of us in turn, "Perhaps I could add something of value to the discussion."

"You have already contributed Exhibit A," said Warriner, handing him the handkerchief. As he spoke, he rose to his feet, and it seemed to me that just before doing so he picked up a small object from the ground, and kept it concealed in the hollow of his hand. But the action had been so swift that I could not be sure.

John Thaneford took and pocketed his handkerchief with the utmost sangfroid. "Thanks," he said carelessly. "I must have left it here by inadvertence, and nowadays even a few inches of real Irish linen is a possession not to be despised. It is certainly mine, and, moreover, it was found on Thaneford property. Under the circumstances you will hardly be justified in putting in a claim for treasure-trove." This with a sneer that fully bared his close set teeth.

I was feeling rather uncomfortable, but Warriner's cool urbanity never failed him. "Glad to have obliged you," he said easily. "The next strong wind probably would have blown it down the cliff. Lovely view, isn't it?"

And indeed it was a charming prospect—the silver ripples of the shallow Whippany edging the emerald meadows that stretched up to meet the shaven lawn of the "Hundred"; the massive ochre bulk of the house, with its roofs of dark gray slate; and, beyond, the copper glow from a clump of purple beeches melting insensibly into the sombre hues of pine and hemlock; in the middle distance, the golden ocean of the wheat; and still farther on, a battery of motor tractors moving snail-like but inexorably against the gallant green lances of the haying fields—"Hildebrand Hundred" in all its glory.

"A *belvedere* in quite the proper sense," commented Warriner. "I dare say you are rather fond of coming here—by way of viewing the promised land, as it were." He smiled provokingly.

John Thaneford was not nimble witted, and he found no fitting rejoinder to Warriner's sarcasm. "I don't know that it is any of your damned business," he barked out, flushing redly.

It was time for me to intervene, for clearly our position was not a tenable one; we were trespassers. "I am sorry to have intruded for the second time within a week," I said evenly. "Unintentional of course."

He made no definite reply, and I swung round. "Get to heel, Gyp," I ordered.

"One moment," demanded Thaneford, "I've been intending to tell you that I shall go back to 'Thane Court' this evening; I mean for good. I'm afraid that my father"—he gulped at something in his throat—"can't be moved for the present."

"Mr. Thaneford will be welcome to the hospitality of the 'Hundred' so long as the emergency exists," I returned smilingly. "I would say as much for yourself, but of course you will do as you please."

"I always intend to," he countered instantly. Then, as though a bit ashamed of his boorishness, he added: "You will have no objection, I suppose, to my coming over to the 'Hundred' to see him?"

"Surely not. And there is also the telephone. I promise that you will be kept fully informed. Good day, Mr. Thaneford."

"Mr. Thaneford!" he echoed. "My dear Cousin Hugh, are you oblivious of the fact that this is the South, and that we are kin?"

"Even if a little less than kind," put in Warriner.

"Cousin John, then," I amended, determined to give no open ground for offence. "Shall I have your traps sent over to the 'Court?'"

"Thanks, but I'm looking in on father around five o'clock, and so won't have to bother you. Down, Vixen!" he added, dealing the collie a hearty cuff as she snapped at Gyp, discreetly paddling at my heels. Warriner started to say something civil, but was ignored, and we passed on without another word.

"Sulky brute!" offered Warriner, but I merely nodded.

"Did you notice that no allusion was made, on either side, to that singular metal rest?" he persisted.

"What was there to say?"

"True for you; but I still contend that the possibilities are interesting—perhaps infinitely so. For instance——" he opened his hand and showed me what lay snugly ensconced within.

"Looks like a piece of glass."

"Man, don't you know a telescopic lens when you see it!"

Warriner produced a silk handkerchief, and with it carefully cleaned and polished what I now fully recognized as a bit of some optical apparatus. He held it up to his eye, and squinted through it. "Do you know there is something peculiar about this blooming lens," he said at length. "I think I'll drive over to Calverton after luncheon, and make a laboratory test. Who knows...."

"What?"

"Tell you later—if there is anything to tell." And not another word on the subject

could I get out of him.

Mrs. Anthony and Betty had been over to the cemetery all morning, and they did not appear at luncheon. Miss Trevor, looking as implacable as a Medusa-head, a comparison inevitably invited by the snaky black ringlets depending on either cheek (an ante-bellum monstrosity which she seemed to affect out of sheer perversity), presided at the table, and most of the conversation was carried on in monosyllables. The poor girl did look wretchedly careworn, and I had the uneasy consciousness of being in part a confidant of her unhappiness through my involuntary espionage in the affair of the whispering gallery. But there was nothing that I could say or do to relieve the tension of the situation. How much did she know concerning the mystery of Francis Graeme's death? To what extent was she an accessory to the crime, if crime it could be proved? When she handed me my tea it was quite in the grand Lucrezia Borgia manner, and it was as certain as anything could be that she and I must remain antagonists until the end of time. But I could make allowances. Eunice Trevor had played the part of poor relation all her life, and the bread of dependence is both a dry and a bitter morsel in the mouth. Not that Betty Graeme would ever have said or done anything to emphasize the obligation under which her cousin's daily existence was passed; on the contrary, I knew that she treated Eunice with unvarying kindness and consideration. But when one is living on the broken meats of charity it is destructive to be always nibbling, between meals, at one's own heart.

Warriner went off to Calverton, and I had a horse saddled in order to ride over the farm and so get a general idea of my inheritance. And indeed it was a glorious one; insensibly a new and stimulating ichor entered into my veins; this was my own country, the chosen home of my forebears: this gracious and beautiful land was part of myself; deep down in its generous bosom went the essential roots of my being, and I thrilled with the consciousness of a new life, a life far more satisfying and abundant than I had ever known before; I was Hildebrand of the "Hundred."

Late in the afternoon I returned, and ran upstairs to freshen my appearance before joining the ladies for a cup of tea on the library terrace. As I passed the sick room I heard the sounds of a violent altercation, and I recognized the voices as belonging to Eunice Trevor and John Thaneford; how indecent for them to be quarrelling in the presence of a man actually moribund! I had no taste for more

eavesdropping, but the door was partially ajar, and I could not help overhearing one significant sentence. Eunice Trevor was speaking.

"As for Betty Graeme, there is no chance there for recouping your fortunes. How do I know? I am a woman myself."

I went on quickly and reached my room. But my blood was hot within me. That surly, brutal boor!

All the time I was changing my clothes I could hear the discussion proceeding, although the words themselves were inaudible. Then came the clumping of heavy boots on the staircase. I looked out of my window, which commanded a view of the carriage sweep, and saw John Thaneford's disreputable old dog-cart waiting before the front door. Presently Thaneford himself appeared, carrying a couple of handbags; he threw the luggage in the cart, mounted, and drove away.

On my own way down I had to go by the room occupied by the elder Thaneford. Quite involuntarily I glanced through the half-opened door; a curious feeling possessed me that the sick man was being dealt with unfairly, that he needed the protection which a guest has a right to expect from his host.

Fielding Thaneford lay, immense and quiescent, in the old-fashioned, canopied bed. He was not asleep, for his eyes were open and rolling restlessly, while the infantile pink and white of his complexion had darkened to a dull crimson; it was plain that he was uneasy, suffering even. And then I realized the source of his discomfort.

Eunice Trevor sat in a highbacked chair at the foot of the bedstead, gazing intently at the helpless man. I used to think that the metaphorical, "If looks could kill!" was mere rhetoric, but now I knew that there may be a deadliness in pure hatred which needs neither spoken word nor overt act for its vehicle of expression. The Medusa-head again, an incarnation of implacable malignity; no wonder that Fielding Thaneford's big, babyish cheeks were beaded with sweat and that his breath came and went in short gasps. One thought involuntarily of the mediæval sorceress sticking her lethal pins into the waxen image of her victim. Only that in this instance the counterfeit presentment was not necessary; the man himself lay bound hand and foot, delivered to the tormentors as they that go down quick into hell. Unable to move or speak he must remain in his physical straitjacket while this tigerish woman was doing him to death, at her leisure, with the invisible knife-thrusts of a great and consuming hatred It was unbearable, and I entered the room with the merest apology for a knock;

instantly the eyes of the basilisk were veiled.

"I was looking for Mr. Thaneford's nurse," I began awkwardly.

"Miss Davenport is off duty from two until five o'clock," answered Miss Trevor with entire composure. "I told Betty that I would take the relief on alternate days. Here is Miss Davenport now."

I turned to greet the pleasant-faced, capable looking young woman who entered, and Miss Trevor glided away without another word. I made the usual inquiries about the patient's condition. "Not quite so well, perhaps," I suggested.

"He does seem a little flushed and restless," answered the nurse, producing her clinical thermometer. "I don't understand it, for he was decidedly better this morning."

"Possibly some outside disturbing influence," I ventured. "Mr. John Thaneford was with his father late this afternoon, and I suspect there was some sort of family jar."

"That big, black man!" said Miss Davenport indignantly. "I can't abide him!" She looked around sharply. "Where is he?"

"I believe he has returned to 'Thane Court.'"

"Well, I shan't let him in the room again if he can't behave himself. See that!" and she showed me the thermometer, which registered a two-degree rise over normal. "Shameful I call it! and I won't have any interference with my patient, no matter who it is."

"I'll back you up there. And perhaps we had better make some other arrangements for the afternoon relief. Miss Trevor has been very obliging, but I'm not sure that she has the proper—well, call it the necessary temperament."

"I know it 'ud give me the creeps to have that slinky, black shadow hovering over me," returned the downright-minded Miss Davenport. "I think I'll put a stop-order on her from this time on."

"I dare say Miss Graeme and I can share the duty between us; at least until it is possible to get hold of another nurse. I'll speak to my cousin and let you know later."

Miss Davenport nodded and turned to her patient. "Cheerio! old son," she said

with the breezy cameraderie born of her two years' experience as an army nurse. "After this we'll keep the willies brushed off, and you'll soon be hitting on all six again. Remember now what your Aunt Flo tells you."

It was impossible to say how much or how little the sick man understood of all that had passed. But as I left the room I murmured a parting word that was intended to be sympathetic and reassuring. I may have been mistaken, but it seemed as though a flash of intense gratitude momentarily softened the stony, blue-china stare of those inscrutable eyes.

After Mrs. Anthony had gone to dress for dinner I talked the matter over with Betty.

"I think you must be mistaken about poor Eunice," she said perplexedly. "But just now I know she is pretty much on edge, and if Miss Davenport doesn't want her that settles it. So if you will help me, Cousin Hugh, I dare say we can manage."

Cousin Hugh! That sounds pleasanter every time I hear it And I like, too, the possessive "we."

Late that evening Warriner telephoned that he had been called to Baltimore on business and would be away for several days. Of course he would see me immediately on his return. At present there was nothing to report.

Chapter IX

1-4-2-4-8

A full fortnight went by, and we seemed to be simply marking time. Warriner was still away, and I had had no word of importance from him. Mr. Fielding Thaneford's condition showed little apparent change, but Miss Davenport told me privately that he was failing steadily. John Thaneford had called some half a dozen times, but his visits to the sick room had been brief and entirely devoid of incident. Either Miss Davenport or Betty and I took care to be present whenever he appeared, and there had been no repetition of any untoward scene. The younger Thaneford contented himself with a few perfunctory inquiries, never addressing his father directly. What would have been the use, since the line of communication had been broken? Moreover, the patient, on his part, never manifested the least desire for more definite intercourse; he seemed to recognize the physical presence of his son, but that was all. And so John Thaneford would come and seem to fill the room for a few moments with his great, black bulk, and again depart. As the door closed behind him, there was never the slightest discernible quiver on the immobile masque propped and bolstered in that amazing vastness of a four-poster, but always the glitter would seem to die out of the watchful eyes, and the slow breathing would become more regular. Whatever the nature of the tension between father and son there could be no question of its reality.

I had taken upon myself the delicate task of telling Eunice Trevor that her volunteer service in the sick room could no longer be accepted. But she acquiesced in the decision with admirably assumed indifference, and thereafter never came near the invalid. Indeed, in those days, I hardly saw her except at luncheon and dinner. Certainly we were not friends, but neither were we avowed enemies; I even realized that, to some extent, I was indispensable to the carrying out of her own tortuous purposes. Once or twice, however, I sensed something in her voice, when she happened to be speaking to Betty, which filled me with a vague disquiet. For remember the knowledge I had acquired of the intimate relations existing between this enigmatic woman and John Thaneford. It was also certain that the latter's financial ruin was impending, and that Betty, even without the landed ownership of the "Hundred," was possessed of no

inconsiderable fortune, and therefore a prize worth acquiring. Not that I believed, for an instant, that a girl like Betty Graeme would even consider such a suitor, and Eunice Trevor had said as much to Thaneford himself; had warned him that his hopes in that direction were assuredly futile. Yet even that certainty could be made the foundation, in the feminine mind, of a justifiable grudge; Betty Graeme could be kind or a good deal less than kind to John Thaneford, and in either case Eunice Trevor would hold it up against her. Any woman will understand how this can be, and I may as well be honest and confess that I got my explanation from Betty herself—only that was a long time afterward.

I can easily comprehend why no one could meet Betty Graeme without wanting to love her, and most of us ended by actually doing so. But that even Betty could have worked the miracle of reaching what passed with Fielding Thaneford for a heart! It does seem incredible. And yet, if she had not accomplished that impossible thing, I know very surely that I should not be telling this particular story. It had been ordained that I should succeed to the seat perilous of "Hildebrand Hundred," and sooner or later must I have paid the predestined price of my great possession. Truly love is the master-key to every door, but few of us think it worth while to try it, or are even willing to make the attempt.

I have spoken of the gulf which seemed to open between Fielding Thaneford and me from the very moment of our first meeting—unbridgable, impassable. But Betty crossed it as easily and as surely as a bird on the wing.

"It seems so unnatural and horrible," she said one afternoon as we were sitting in the sick room. "There he lies within hand reach, and yet immeasurably removed. Silence and darkness—oh, I can't bear it!"

"I think he understands what is said to him," I ventured.

"All the worse if he can't break through from his side of the wall. But there must be a way, and I am going to find it."

She left the room, returning a few minutes later with a large square of cardboard on which she had printed the letters of the alphabet. Now I should have made it plain that the sole physical function remaining to Fielding Thaneford was a limited control of the right hand; we had learned to distinguish in its movements the two elementary expressions of assent and dissent.

Betty went to the bedside, and gently slipped the sheet of cardboard under the sick man's right hand. "You see what I mean, Mr. Thaneford," she said, with an

infinite note of sympathy in her voice. "If you would point out the letters one by one, no matter how slowly. We will both be very patient—please now."

Fielding Thaneford's hand—the hand of a very old man, with its thickened knuckles and swollen blue veins—quivered slightly, but remained motionless. Yet I fancied that his glance consciously sought the girl's face and rested there; ordinarily you felt that his gaze merely passed over you, and then travelled inimitably onward and outward. It was certain that he understood the proposal, even while unwilling to act upon it. Twice she repeated the suggestion; and then, too tactful to force the point, she smiled and withdrew the square of cardboard. "Perhaps to-morrow," she said with exceeding gentleness, while I marvelled that any human being could have withstood her. But then what quality of our common humanity could inhere in that huge, inert mass of flesh, animated, as it was, by a mere spark of conscious intelligence.

Betty was not one to be easily discouraged. On the morrow she tried again, and again without definite result. The third day the miracle seemed on the point of fulfillment. Fielding Thaneford's forefinger actually moved to the letter B, and rested there. No amount of feminine cajolery could bring about any further compliance, but surely the first step had been taken. "I really believe," said Betty to me, between a smile and a tear, "that he had my name in mind." "How could he help it," I retorted; whereat she blushed so divinely that I could barely resist taking her bodily in my arms—then and there, for once and for all. "You will see to-morrow," she predicted with gay confidence.

But to-morrow brought an unexpected turn. Some subtle change had come upon the sick man in the night, and Doctor Marcy, after the usual examination, looked grave. "I can't be positive," he said, "but I think he has had another slight stroke. Probably a question now of a few hours."

Nevertheless at noon he appeared to revive, and was able to take some gruel and the white of an egg whipped up in sherry. Miss Davenport went for her usual constitutional, and we decided that it would not be necessary to notify John Thaneford. The latter had not been near the house for two days, and had not even troubled himself to telephone. But, considered from any point of view, his absence was preferable to his presence.

It was very quiet in the sick room. The day was warm, but not uncomfortably so, and a cooling breeze, heavy with the fragrance of summer flowers, drifted in at the casement windows.

Suddenly Betty seized her square of cardboard. "He wants to say something?" she whispered, as she passed me. "Don't you see it in his face?" But I, being a man, and so dull of understanding, could only nod and wonder dumbly.

Too late it seemed, for the stiffening fingers had lost even the small powers of functioning that they had hitherto preserved. Even I could now see that Fielding Thaneford was desirous of speaking some last word, of voicing some final message. But, apparently, coordination between brain and muscle had ceased entirely. Absorbed and intent, Betty leaned over him. "Is it John?" she asked. The hand achieved an almost imperceptible motion, but both of us recognized the emphatic quality of its dissent. "Oh!" cried Betty, with an overwhelming rush of sympathy, and took the almost nerveless member into the intimate fellowship of her two warm, exquisitely sensitive palms. Do you remember my speaking of the supreme distinction of her handclasp; how it seemed to fit so perfectly?

Yes, it was undeniably evident that the spirit of Fielding Thaneford was striving desperately to rend its clayey envelope, and deliver its message in terms intelligible to mortal senses. But surely the vehicle was wanting; it could not be. And then, quite certainly, I knew that something had been transmitted through the mediumship of that intimate handclasp. Betty's eyes grew luminous as stars; she whispered some words too low for me to hear. "Is that it?" she concluded. The fast glazing eyes said yes, as plainly as lips could have uttered the word.

What had happened? Suddenly the spark of life behind the monstrous masque that had been Fielding Thaneford's face had disappeared; quite as when the wind extinguishes the candle in a paper lantern. Betty turned to me in a rain of tears. "He is gone," she murmured.

Strange! that I of all men should be the one to compose Fielding Thaneford's hands upon his breast and close his sightless eyes. But life's obligations are none the less imperative that they are unforeseen. The man lying dead upon the bed had never spoken a single word to me; indeed our glances had met but once, and then had instantly fallen away. How could we be other than eternally alien, and yet these final offices to our common mortality had fallen to my hand. And it was still short of a month since the messenger of fate had brought me the invitation to attend the funeral services of my kinsman, Francis Graeme.

Miss Davenport came back from her walk, and assumed charge of affairs with her accustomed efficiency. I offered to do the telephoning to John Thaneford, but Betty determined that the announcement ought to come from her. Just before dinner he drove over, and remained in the room for perhaps a quarter of an hour. None of us saw him, but he had the grace to leave a brief word of thanks to Betty for the profusion of white carnations that she had insisted on cutting and arranging with her own hands.

Late that evening Betty came to me on the library terrace where I sat smoking innumerable cigarettes. "You know he tried to tell me something at the end," she said.

"Yes."

"All he could manage was just the slightest possible pressure of the hand. A succession of numbers then."

"Do you want to tell me what the numbers were?"

"Of course. They were 1-4-2-4-8. I am sure I got them correctly."

"Not much to be made out of that," I commented.

"No, but I feel certain that he meant something by the message, something of importance."

"To whom?"

"How can anyone say? Will you write the figures down, so that there can be no possibility of my forgetting."

I pulled out my note-book, and inscribed the unintelligible formula: 1-4-2-4-8. The resolution of the problem naturally intrigued me, and the obvious first line of approach was the application of the old Russian "knock" system in which each letter is identified with its numerical position in the alphabetical sequence. I explained the theory to Betty, and she was all eagerness for me to try it out. It took but a moment or two to replace the numbers by their corresponding letters; for example, the figure 1 stands for A, the first letter of the alphabet, and the figure 4 represents the fourth letter or D. The complete series read: A-D-B-D-H.

"Not even a vowel to juggle with," I said ruefully. "Blinder than ever, I should

say."

"But it does mean something," returned Betty stoutly. "And some day we shall know."

Chapter X

I Receive an Ultimatum

Fielding Thaneford was buried three days later in S. Saviour's churchyard. As relatives, even in remote degree, we were bound to attend the services, and also to be present at the interment. For Betty it was an ordeal, the reopening of a half-closed wound, and I could feel her hand tremble as it lay in the crook of my arm, the grave yawning at our feet. In my capacity as Hildebrand of the "Hundred" I was already her official protector, and I was looking forward to the establishment of a relationship infinitely nearer and dearer. Even now I think she sensed what was in my mind and heart; but, after all these emotional upheavals, there must be a decent interval for a new adjustment to the facts of life—compensation, as the mathematical formula has it. The mutual understanding had already been established, and the flower of our future happiness would be all the lovelier for that we did not seek to force its bourgeoning.

As the funeral party withdrew from the burial enclosure, John Thaneford presented himself.

"I shall be going away Saturday," he began, fixing his eyes exclusively on Betty's face.

"Do you mean for a visit?" she inquired.

"I don't quite know," he evaded. "But I dare say the 'Court' will be shut up indefinitely."

"I am sorry for that."

"Are you going to be at home within an hour or so? There is something I have to say to you. Now then, I won't be put off by made-up excuses," he added, seeing that Betty hesitated.

"Come any time after five," she answered. He stood aside, and we passed on.

After luncheon I went down to the lower reach of the Whippany where we were preparing to install a small electric power and storage plant. Presently, I saw a familiar figure walking over from the house—Chalmers Warriner.

"Just got back from New York last night," he explained, "and thought I'd run over and see you all. So the old man died?"

We talked generally on the events of the last fortnight; then I went more particularly into the circumstances attendant upon Fielding Thaneford's last hours, and Warriner listened attentively. The series of numbers which Betty had obtained from the dying man plainly appealed to his imagination, but he agreed with me that neither the numbers themselves nor their alphabetical equivalents offered any intelligible clue. "Of course he wanted to put over some message," he mused, "and he trusted to Betty's intuition to make things plain."

Betty, instead of Miss Graeme! Really, I hadn't been aware that Warriner was on so intimate a footing at the "Hundred." But of course it was all right; Warriner was older, by at least ten years, than either Betty or myself, and he probably looked on himself as a sort of elder brother to the entire household. I tried to recall if Betty was accustomed to call him by his Christian name. But I could not remember ... it was none of my business ... what difference anyway could it make.

Unconsciously I had yielded to the slight pressure of Warriner's hand upon my arm. He led me away from the noisy gang of negroes working on the projected dam and power-house; presently we were within sight of one of the farm barns. The great double doors were open, but the distance was full half a mile, and nothing within the structure was discernible.

Warriner unwrapped the slender parcel that he was carrying, and produced what looked very much like an old-fashioned spy glass, only of most unusual length. "And that's just what it is," he said, divining my thought. "Except that I have replaced the object glass with the lens I picked up the other day at Thaneford's crow's-nest on Sugar Loaf."

"Go on."

"I told you that there seemed to be some extraordinary optical properties in that piece of glass. I tried it out in my own laboratory, and got certain results. Then, when I was in Baltimore, I had Carter of Johns Hopkins check me up with his more complete apparatus. Some rather astonishing conclusions."

"How so?"

"Well, you've probably heard of the telephoto lens—a sort of long distance microscope, to use very colloquial language. I have seen telephoto pictures of the Matterhorn, taken five or six miles away, in which you could make out the actual geologic texture of the rocks.

"But, of course, there must be plenty of light on the object to get clear definition. On the same principle, one can stand inside a room and see everything outdoors with perfect distinctness. It's a very different thing, trying to look into a room from without. The visibility is low, as they say, and you don't get much."

"Yes, I understand that."

"Again there are optical lenses specially designed to make the most of poor illumination. A familiar example is the sailor's night-glass.

"You guess what I'm coming to. This particular lens has the telephoto range, and, at the same time, it works with the minimum of illumination. Never saw anything like it before, and it would be worth a fortune in the binocular field."

"Show me."

Chalmers Warriner rested the long glass on a fence post, ranged it on the open door of the barn nearly three thousand yards away, and did some preliminary focussing and other adjustments. He took a look, and then invited me to do the same.

It was truly marvellous! It seemed as though I were standing on the very threshold of the barn and looking inside. I recognized Adam Lake, the field foreman, working on the engine of a small tractor. In the background, Zack was oiling a set of harness. The details were astoundingly distinct.

"It's evident now," continued Warriner, "that the iron trough at Thaneford's observation point was intended to support a telescope such as this. The instrument is too long to hold steadily in the hand, and it had to be ranged precisely on the two-foot opening of the pridella. It was therefore possible to sit comfortably concealed on Sugar Loaf, and keep accurate tab on whatever was passing in Francis Graeme's library; provided, of course, that one of the pridellas was open. Even this wonderful lens could not penetrate stained glass. It isn't an X-ray apparatus."

"Granting all your premises—why?"

"And that's just what I would like mightily to know," answered Warriner. "But let's go back to the house; there's something else I want to show you."

We went to the library, and, by way of refreshment after our long walk in the sun, I told Effingham to make us some claret cup. Presently he brought it in, and proceeded to fill a couple of long, Rhinewine glasses with the beverage. The big cut-glass pitcher was heavily beaded with cool moisture, and looked irresistibly inviting; the Eighteenth Amendment was unanimously declared unconstitutional, and we drank and drank again. So long as the cellar of "Hildebrand Hundred" continued to function it was still worth while to acquire a thirst.

Warriner took a small object from a cardboard box, and passed it over to me. "Remember that?" he asked.

"I suppose it's the same moth cocoon which we found plastered on the postern-door——"

"And directly on the line between door and casing," interjected Warriner. "Being proof positive that the door could not have been opened for a period considerably antecedent to Graeme's death."

"I presume so."

"Well, I took that cocoon home, and made some tests. It had been fastened on the door by means of mucilage—common, ordinary mucilage."

I stared at Warriner without speaking. This was indeed confounding.

"To air some of my recently acquired entomological knowledge, I may tell you that the moth caterpillar generally goes underground to enter the pupa stage," continued Warriner. "If the transformation does take place at the surface the cocoon is sometimes found under a dead leaf or a fallen branch; still more rarely beneath the bark of a tree. It is virtually impossible that it should have been fixed naturally in such an exposed position as the crack of a door.

"Even more significant is the fact that this cocoon is of a species not indigenous to Maryland; in fact, it doesn't belong to this country at all. Come over here," and he led me to the corner in which stood the glass cases containing Richard Hildebrand's famous collection of the *lepidoptera*. Warriner pointed out a magnificent specimen of the Great Peacock moth of Europe, an entomological

aristocrat described by the French naturalist, J. H. Fabre, in one of his fascinating essays. Now all the other specimens of the adult butterfly or moth were accompanied by their respective cocoons. But below the Great Peacock was a vacant space. Warriner lifted the lid of the case, and extended his hand for the cocoon that I still held. He fixed it in the empty place. "Certainly it looks as though it belonged there," he said tersely.

Effingham came in to take away the tray of pitcher and glasses. "Come here, boy," said Warriner with the confident command of the born and bred Southerner, and Effingham was prompt to obey.

"You remember the day Marse Francis died?"

"Yassah."

"When Miss Eunice sent you up stairs to get the ammonia was she wearing any kind of a wrap?"

"Nossah. Dere was a lil' brack shawl er-hangin' on 'er arm; nuffin else."

Warriner glanced at me. "Keep that in mind," he said quietly. He turned again to Effingham. "Did she ask you for anything?" he continued.

"Nossah."

"I believe you're lying to me. Just think it over ... carefully now." With the greatest deliberation Warriner took some strands of coarse green and yellow worsted from his pocket, and proceeded to tie them into an intricate-appearing knot. Effingham watched him with concentrated and fascinated attention. .

"Well?" said Warriner sharply, and leaned forward with the variegated knot depending from his forefinger. Effingham shivered, and backed away.

"I do 'member one lil' thing," stammered the old man. "Mis' Eunice, she done tole me to-gib 'er——"

"The master-key?"

"Yassah, dat's ezackly what she done said. She 'splained the doctah might want to go in the liburry befo' I come back."

"Then you did give it to Miss Eunice?"

"She grabbed it fum me, right outen my han', and tole me to git erlong. An' dat's

de whole Gawd's truf, Marse Chalmers."

"All right," nodded Warriner, and Effingham retired with every indication that he was glad to get away.

"Anything is voodoo to one of the old-time darkies," smiled Warriner. "A bit of colored ribbon and two crossed sticks is a good enough 'cunjer' for almost any emergency."

"I recall your threat at the inquest about the postern-door," I assented. "It brought home the bacon without delay. All the same, my dear chap, you must admit that these revelations are most disturbing. I don't know——"

"——what to think of Eunice Trevor." Warriner had interrupted to finish out my sentence for me. "But let me sum up my conclusions to date," he continued.

"Miss Trevor was on the library terrace around one o'clock. Presumably she received a signal from the observation point on Sugar Loaf that Francis Graeme was lying dead, and that she might safely enter the room, and abstract the iron despatch-box which was supposed to contain the will disinheriting John Thaneford. She hadn't the nerve to examine the box in the dead man's presence, or she may have been alarmed by some interruption from without—say Effingham's summons to luncheon. The thought occurred to her of blinding her own trail, and so she snatched a cocoon at random from the case of mounted specimens, daubed it with library gum, and stuck it on the crack of the postern-door, of course from the outside, as she was making her escape by the secret entrance. Naturally she was not aware that, in her haste, she had dropped one of her roses in the passageway.

"In the seclusion of her room she opened and thoroughly searched the box, but found only the original will in which John Thaneford had been named the residuary legatee. The natural explanation would be that Francis Graeme had been prevented from carrying out his intention of making you his heir, and that no later instrument was in existence. In her devotion to John Thaneford's interests, it would now become necessary for her to get the despatch-box back in the library before the tragedy should be discovered and the room carefully examined. She found her opportunity when Doctor Marcy went to meet Betty, leaving Effingham on guard at the library door. You remember the darky telling us that she had a shawl on her arm, an obvious means of concealing such an object as the despatch-box. Then she took the master-key from him——"

"Why did she wait so long?" I interrupted. "She might never have had that chance."

"Well, at the first opening of the library door she may have been too unnerved to risk it. You recall that she fainted at the moment when Marcus, the house-boy, made the discovery of the body.

"In the second place the box is rather bulky, and she would have found great difficulty in placing it in position, under the alert and curious eyes of the servants. Finally, she may have had some thought of re-entering the room by means of the postern-door, which still remained unlocked."

"A desperate *dernier ressort*," I observed. "Somebody would have certainly seen her."

"Granted. Anyway Betty's arrival did give her a chance, and she was quick to take advantage of it.

"Well, that's my case," concluded Warriner. "How does it strike you?"

"It has its weak points."

"Agreed."

"Who unlocked the library door when Doctor Marcy returned with my Cousin Betty?"

"Marcy says it was Effingham. Miss Trevor would want to get the master-key out of her possession the instant that she had accomplished her purpose of replacing the despatch-box. And somehow she managed it, even though Betty and the doctor arrived on the scene a trifle in advance of Effingham's return with the ammonia."

"Very well; we'll drop that issue for the present. Assuming that you have fairly reconstructed the action connected with the abstraction of the despatch-box and its return to the room, there still remains the question of how Francis Graeme came to his death. Was it the accident of his falling and striking his head on that same iron box, or was he attacked from behind? Remember that the postern-door was unlocked all the time."

"I don't think it was Eunice Trevor who killed him," returned Warriner. "Of course, it is conceivable that she entered by the secret way, struck Graeme down,

and escaped with the despatch-box; everything else following as before. But, in the first place, she is a woman, and below the normal feminine in the matter of physique. An assault of this nature is no child's play, even granting the element of complete surprise. Secondly, it is pretty clear that she entered the library in obedience to a signal from John Thaneford. He had been watching the progress of events through his wonderful telephoto lens, and the waving of a handkerchief told her that the way was open."

"How about Thaneford himself?"

"Assuming that it was a murder, I still see no ground for trying to fix the guilt on him. He could hardly have approached the library that morning without being seen by Zack and Zeb."

"He might have had an accomplice, or rather a tool. But I suppose that hypothesis is open to the same objection—the continued presence of the two men who were mowing the lawn?"

"Yes and no," returned Warriner thoughtfully. "A white man certainly would be noticed. But there are always negroes coming and going about our Southern houses, and Zeb and Zack would have paid no attention to anyone of their own color. Moreover, there are plenty of bad niggers capable of cutting your throat for a couple of dollars."

"But think of the risk involved in using such an instrument!" I exclaimed. "And somehow I can't quite believe it of John Thaneford, heartily as I dislike him. I can understand his committing this alleged crime with his own hand, but I don't see him hiring a black thug to act for him."

"Nor I," agreed Warriner. "It isn't in the picture."

"And so we come back to the verdict of the coroner's jury: Dead by the visitation of God. Only it's curious——"

"Yes?"

"——that John Thaneford should have had such definite foreknowledge that the visitation in question was impending. Remember the look-out on Sugar Loaf and the handkerchief marked with his initials."

"It's a blind alley right enough," assented Warriner. He picked up the spy glass with which he had been experimenting, and looked it over with minute attention.

"Did you ever hear," he asked, "that in his younger days Fielding Thaneford was considered to be an expert in the science of optics? He made a number of improvements in lenses, and enjoyed a reputation quite analogous to that of John Brashear, of Pittsburg. I dare say he constructed this very lens."

"But on the twenty-first of June, this year of grace, the old man was physically helpless. He couldn't have walked ten feet without assistance."

"I'm not trying to bring him into it," replied Warriner calmly. "I merely state another fact that should be borne in mind."

The noise of wheels on the gravelled driveway announced the arrival of a visitor, and presently I recognized John Thaneford's voice inquiring for Betty. It annoyed me that he should come to the house, but Betty had given him the appointment, and I had no shadow of an excuse for interfering. After fidgetting around for some ten minutes I begged Warriner to make himself at home, and left the house for the ostensible purpose of giving some directions to the workmen who were relaying a brick wall leading to the glass-houses. But I kept an eye on the front door, and when, a quarter of an hour later, John Thaneford finally made his appearance, I managed to meet him on the portico. One glance at his dark face satisfied me as to the nature of the answer he had received from Betty. That was all I wanted to know, and I would have passed him with a bare word and nod. But he would not have it so.

"I have just one thing to say to you, Cousin Hugh," he began.

Cousin Hugh again! It was astonishing what concentrated insolence this rural bully contrived to put into this ostensibly friendly salutation. But no matter; I did not intend to have any brawling on my own doorstep, and I determined to take no notice of covert provocation.

"And it's this," he continued. "The girl or the 'Hundred'—you can choose between them. But both you shan't have."

He waited for me to reply, but I only stood there and looked at him.

"Which is it to be?" he asked, his thick, black eyebrows narrowing to a V-point.

"I've nothing to say to you," I answered.

"Very good. Only remember that I played fair, and gave you your choice. Good evening, Cousin Hugh, and damn you for a white-livered Yank that I wouldn't feed to my hawgs." He raised his hand as though half inclined to strike me; then he changed his mind and dropped it.

"Please don't hesitate on my account," I observed. "I can take whatever you may be able to give." Whereupon he favored me with another scowl, and departed.

"That puts him out of the running," I reflected with no small satisfaction. But my complacency was short-lived. Chalmers Warriner stayed to dinner, and my worst fears were confirmed; Betty did call him by his Christian name, and the two were evidently on the very best of terms. I dare say I must have sulked a little, for after Warriner had driven back to Calverton Betty became appallingly distant and reserved. I had to make my peace, and I did so with all humbleness. I fancied that there was a subdued glint of amusement in Betty's eye as I stumbled through some banal excuses about a splitting headache—I am nothing if not original. But she gave me absolution very generously, and we both agreed that Warriner was one of the best fellows on earth.

"It's mostly on account of the reputation of the 'Hundred' for hospitality," added Betty. "You know, we think a lot of that down here, and you are now the head of the family. Of course you understand; and so, good night, Cousin Hugh."

Cousin Hugh again! But with a difference; all the difference.

I had been sitting alone in the library after the retirement of the ladies. It struck eleven o'clock, late hours for country mice, and I rose to go to my room. Just then the telephone bell rang, and I found Warriner on the wire. "I have this moment learned," he began, "that a negro named Dave Campion was arrested late this evening, charged with the murder of Francis Graeme. You had better come to Calverton the first thing in the morning."

Chapter XI

The Rider of the Black Horse

Given the exigency, and through what tortuous and secret channels will not the human mind seek to communicate with its kind! Call it telepathy or what not, the phenomenon itself is a well established fact; one that we accept without attempting to explain it.

Not a syllable of Warriner's message had crossed my lips, and yet by breakfast time the bruit of it was in the very air; the negroes were collecting here and there in little whispering groups; I overheard Eunice Trevor telephoning to Calverton for a confirmation of the report; finally, Betty herself asked me what it all meant. I had just finished telling her the bare facts when Warriner's car came swiftly up the drive; he alighted and we went into the library.

"No use in your going over until three o'clock," he began. "At least that is the time set by the magistrate for the hearing, and it will take several hours to get the material witnesses together. I believe that summonses have been served on some of your people, including Marcus, the house-boy, and Zack and Zeb."

"Who is the man, and what were the circumstances of his arrest?" I asked.

"His name, as I told you last night, is Dave Campion."

"Oh, I know him," put in Betty. "He is a sort of peddler; at least he travels around with a miscellaneous lot of perfumes and hair ribbons for the women, and cheap safety razors for the men."

"Ostensibly so," nodded Warriner, "but his real business is bootlegging."

"You mean whiskey?"

"Yes, and worse. You have heard of 'coke'?"

"Cocaine powder?"

"Yes."

"'Happy dust' the darkies call it," added Betty. "Last month father forbade

Campion to ever come on the place again."

Warriner looked interested. "I suppose Campion resented the exclusion," he remarked. But on this point Betty could say nothing; Mr. Graeme had merely told her that the negro peddler had been warned off the "Hundred" property.

"He is a smart nigger," explained Warriner. "And so light in color that you would hardly suspect the dash of the tar brush, as the English say. He was educated at Hampton-Sidney, and talks just like a white man—rather proud of it, too—but worthless in every way, and a menace to the community."

"Education then isn't any guarantee of morality among the negroes," I observed.

"Why should it be any more than with our own class?" retorted Warriner. "No, Campion is a bad nigger, and even Hampton-Sidney couldn't make him over."

"But about the arrest?" I urged.

"The fellow was drunk last night, and openly displayed a handsome matchbox; gold with a turquoise set in the spring knob. Several persons recognized it as belonging to Mr. Francis Graeme; in fact, it bore his initials. The police were informed, and the arrest followed."

"No explanations were made, I suppose."

"I told you he was a smart nigger. Not a word could they get out of him, beyond a general denial of any wrongdoing."

"Dave Campion was at the 'Hundred' the day my father died," said Betty. "I met him as I was riding down the Green Drive on my way to 'Powersthorp.' I dare say he took the drive in preference to the regular carriage road so as to avoid observation."

"About what time of the day was that?" asked Warriner.

"Close to one o'clock. I was lunching with Hilda Powers, and had been late in starting."

"That's an important point," mused Warriner.

"Do you think I ought to go to the hearing and testify?" continued Betty, evidently troubled.

"Not the least in the world," said Warriner promptly. "Sheriff Greenough may be

countrified, but he can see through a grindstone with a hole in it as quickly as the next man. Undoubtedly he knows all about Campion's visit to the 'Hundred' that morning, and has his witnesses to prove it."

Warriner had business farther on, and presently he left us with the understanding that he would be at the magistrate's court at three o'clock. I was rather surprised to hear Betty express a wish to accompany me to Calverton. "Not to the hearing," she explained; "I don't think I could stand that. But I have some shopping to do, and then I'll go to Mary Crandall's for a cup of tea. You can pick me up there."

I felt bound in courtesy to invite Miss Trevor to make one of the party. But she refused, with a curtness that was almost rude. "I shan't waste any time running up blind alleys," she said sharply. "There won't be a shred of direct evidence against Campion, and the Court will be obliged to discharge him."

"But the matchbox," I persisted. "Surely he will have to explain very convincingly how it came to be in his possession."

"Well, you might ask Judge Hendricks why he doesn't read the papers once in a while," replied Miss Trevor, her black eyes snapping and her thin upper lip curling disdainfully. Evidently it was not for me to argue the case any further, and, personally, I was only too pleased that I should now have Betty to myself on the trip to Calverton and back.

Shortly after luncheon we started, Betty driving her own pony pair to a trim basket-phaeton. To think of going anywhere nowadays in other form of conveyance than the gas-wagon! But I fully appreciated the distinction of an equipage really well turned out, and then I was sitting at Betty Graeme's side; yes, I found it all very pleasant.

Arrived at Calverton I dropped Betty at White and Callender's, put up the team at a livery stable, and found my way to Justice Hendricks' chambers. Warriner joined me a few minutes later, and presently my former acquaintance, Sheriff Greenough, brought in the prisoner and the hearing began.

Dave Campion was a rather good-looking mulatto, keen-eyed, and apparently quite able to take care of his own interests. On being questioned by the judge, he made no secret of his having been at the "Hundred" the morning of June the twenty-first.

"Had you not been warned by Mr. Francis Graeme not to trespass upon his property?" asked Judge Hendricks.

"Yes, sir."

"Why did you disregard that injunction?"

"I went to the 'Hundred' on business."

"What sort of business?"

"Private, sir. With Mr. Graeme himself."

"Did you see him?"

"No, sir. Marcus, the house-boy, told me that he was at work in the library, and had left orders not to be disturbed."

"Then you were in the house?"

"Yes, sir. I went to the kitchen door, and Marcus took me to the butler's pantry."

"Where was Effingham?"

"At work in the dining room. I didn't see him at all."

"How long were you in the house?"

"About twenty minutes, I should say, sir. It was just quarter after one o'clock when I went away."

"What did you do then?"

"I went to the south lawn, and saw Zack Cameron."

"He bought some article, or articles, from you?"

"Yes, sir."

"How did Mr. Graeme's matchbox come into your possession?"

"I found it in the road nearly opposite S. Saviour's Church?"

"When?"

"About two weeks ago, sir."

"And you came to the 'Hundred' intending to return it to Mr. Graeme?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's all for the present. No; wait a moment. What particular article did you sell to Zack Cameron?"

Campion hesitated for a barely perceptible interval; then he answered steadily: "A pint of whiskey, sir."

"You knew that you were breaking the law?"

"Yes, sir."

On the whole Campion's testimony had been in his favor. His answers had been clear and apparently ingenuous, and his frank admission of the minor offence of illicit liquor selling added weight to his other statements.

Zack Cameron, on being closely interrogated, owned that he had not been entirely truthful about the presence of strangers at the "Hundred" on the morning in question. He admitted that the peddler, Dave Campion, had appeared on the south lawn a few minutes after he and Zeb has started on their post-meridian stint.

"What did you buy of him?"

Zack rolled his eyes, and looked excessively uncomfortable.

"Campion says it was a pint of whiskey. Is that true?"

"Yassah, dat am puffeckly c'rect. You see, Boss, I had a toofache——"

"Stand down," ordered the magistrate, and Marcus was called.

The house-boy corroborated in general the statements made by Campion. He had admitted the peddler at the back entrance, and had taken him to the butler's pantry. Campion had asked to see Mr. Graeme, and had been told that he was engaged.

"Were you with Campion all the time he was in the house?" asked Judge Hendricks.

"Yassah, 'cept when Mr. Effingham done call me into the dining room to help him turn ober the rug."

"Five minutes perhaps?"

But Marcus could not be positive about the elapsed period. He could only assert that when he returned to the pantry Campion had gone; presumably he had let himself out.

"But there is a door from the pantry into the short passage that leads to the library, isn't there?"

"Yassah."

"How about Effingham's master-key; did you ever hear of it?"

Marcus grinned all over with the irresistible comedy of his race. "Eberybody know all about 'um," he chuckled throatily. "Mr. Effingham hid 'um behind clock like old dog wif bone. Yah! yah!"

"Then it was no particular secret, the master-key and its hiding place?"

"Nossah."

"That will do. Let's have the prisoner again."

Campion remained perfectly cool and self-possessed. He readily agreed that he had been left alone in the pantry for a period of five minutes; it might even have been longer. He admitted that he had gone to the library door, and had knocked two or three times.

"That may have been what disturbed Eunice Trevor," whispered Warriner in my ear. "Just at that moment she must have been in the room with the despatch-box

in her hand."

"You got no reply to your knock?" continued Judge Hendricks.

"No, sir."

"Did you know of the master-key?"

"Yes, sir. Marcus showed me its hiding place behind the clock, and we had been laughing at old Effingham's simplicity."

"Then it didn't occur to you that you might use the master-key?"

"Well, I didn't fancy the idea of actually intruding upon Mr. Graeme. You remember, sir, that he had forbidden me to come on the place."

"Yet you summoned enough courage to knock?"

"That was a little different, sir, from walking in on him unannounced. Besides, I really did wish to see him."

"For what purpose?"

It was the crucial question, and we all craned our necks in our eagerness to catch the reply. But Campion's voice was without a tremor.

"To restore the matchbox and claim the twenty dollars reward," he answered.

"What proof can you give that the article in question was lost and a reward offered for its return?"

The mulatto drew a folded newspaper from his pocket, and handed it to Judge Hendricks. It was a copy of the *King William County Clarion*, and a paragraph in the advertising columns was heavily blue-pencilled. It was to the effect that a gold and turquoise-jewelled matchbox, bearing the initials F. H. G., had been lost on the road between Calverton and Lynn. A reward of twenty dollars was offered for its return to Mr. Graeme of "Hildebrand Hundred."

"The date of this copy of the Clarion," said Judge Hendricks, frowning portentously, "is June 10, 1919. In the absence of any further evidence I direct the discharge of the prisoner."

"There still remain some interesting possibilities," said Warriner to me, as we walked down the street. "On one side of the locked door that black shadow of a woman, ready to do anything to save her lover's fortune; on the other, that yellow-faced scoundrel, eager for plunder, fingering the master-key, and trying to muster up enough courage to use it. And between them, a dead man. Or was he dead at that particular moment? Perhaps the two of them, working together, might have brought the thing about."

"But Campion could hardly have committed the murder, returned the master-key to its position behind the clock, and left the house, by the kitchen entrance, in the short space of five minutes," I objected.

"Well, how is this for an hypothesis?" retorted Warriner. "Campion is the tool employed by John Thaneford to do the dirty work. He is instructed to be at the library door at a few minutes past one. Thaneford, with his telephoto lens, sees that Graeme is dozing in his chair. He signals to Eunice, who enters by the postern-door and admits the waiting Campion, the master-key not being used at all. The crime accomplished, both escape by the secret door, leaving the cocoon gummed in place to destroy the clue."

"Rather fortuitous, don't you think? The whole train of circumstances goes off the track in case Mr. Graeme doesn't fall asleep at just the right moment."

"Of course," agreed Warriner. "And I was beginning to fancy myself as an amateur sleuth," he added a trifle ruefully.

"Anyway you have the magnifying telephoto lens and the purloined cocoon to your credit, my dear Chalmers. As for the rest of it, we may as well fall back on our coroner's verdict: Dead by the visitation of God. Will you come back to dinner this evening?"

But Warriner declined, pleading the pressure of his laboratory work. I picked up Betty at the Crandall's, and we drove back slowly to the "Hundred."

It was nearing sunset as we rolled up the drive under the arching shadow of the lindens. Suddenly Betty started, and grasped my arm. Directly opposite rose the massive bulk of the Sugar Loaf. In an open space a portion of the woodland road was visible, where it wound around the upper escarpment of the dome; and there, outlined against the level rays of the sinking sun, stood motionless a great black horse. The powerful figure of the rider was readily recognizable—John Thaneford.

"He told me that he was going away to-day," whispered Betty, as though fearful of being overheard. "For an indefinite period," she added.

"Forever, I hope," I muttered under my breath.

The silhouette of horse and rider stood out stark, almost colossal, against the crimsoning skyline. But the black shadow of Sugar Loaf was lengthening swiftly over the level meadows that margined the little river Whippany; the advancing darkness seemed to be sucking out, in its chill embrace, all the warmth and brightness of the summer day. Betty shivered, touched up the horses and we speeded on. But so long as I could see the great black horseman remained motionless, watchful, eternally menacing.

Chapter XII

Safe Find, Safe Bind

Let me now pass over some six months concerning which there are no events of particular moment to be recorded—I mean in connection with the tragedy.

Late in December Betty and I were married very quietly-at S. Saviour's Church, Bob Mercer coming down to assist in the ceremony. During the summer and autumn I had been absent almost continuously in Philadelphia, engaged in winding up the trusteeship which had formed the bulk of my professional work. Of course, I had already come to a full understanding with my dear girl, and it was quite natural that she should continue to live on at the "Hundred," the only home that she had ever known. The presence of Mrs. Anthony preserved the convenances; and, after long cogitation, I had formally requested Eunice Trevor to stay on, in her old capacity of paid companion to Betty. Perhaps it was an unwise decision, but let me briefly recapitulate the influencing circumstances. Here they are:

Eunice was Betty's first cousin, and the two girls had been brought up together, almost from infancy. Moreover, they were friendly, if not precisely intimate. Eunice was absolutely penniless, and I could not send her away, even with provision for her financial future, without a full explanation to Betty. Now whatever my surmises and suspicions there was no direct evidence that Francis Graeme's death had been due to violence; he was resting quietly in S. Saviour's churchyard, and Betty's sorrow ought not to be reawakened except for grave cause. Whatever part Eunice Trevor had taken in the tragedy—always assuming that there had been a tragedy—must have been a consequent of her unfortunate entanglement with John Thaneford; and God knows she had been punished for her fault through the irremediable wound to her affections. I could not believe, moreover, that she had been an active participant in any crime, overt or covert. Circumstances might have made her a confidante, even a tool, but she had not been an actual accessory to Francis Graeme's death, either before or after the event. So much by way of simple justice to the girl.

In the second place, the chapter of incidents seemed to have closed with the acquittal of Dave Campion and the disappearance of John Thaneford. No word

of any kind had come from the latter, and his whereabouts remained entirely unknown; it was a fair presumption that he never would reappear to trouble us. His financial affairs were hopelessly involved, and "Thane Court" itself was to be sold at public auction in February in order to satisfy the demands of the creditors.

And finally, while the young woman's conduct had been indiscreet, if not absolutely disloyal, her lesson had been an exceedingly bitter one, and it was charitable to assume that it had been taken to heart. After my marriage to Betty in December it would be time enough to consider making other arrangements. Yes, my decision was taken, and now it was necessary to communicate it to Eunice herself.

Miss Trevor listened to my proposal in stony silence, but in the first flush of my new happiness I could easily overlook even a direct ungraciousness. Mrs. Anthony was old and a semi-invalid; Betty would have her cousin's companionship during my long continued absence North, and that was enough. The upshot of our conference was that Miss Trevor agreed to stay on at the "Hundred." She admitted that the arrangement would be convenient, as the school position for which she had applied would not be available until the following September.

"Then it is settled," I concluded, with as much cordiality as I could put into my voice. "I'm trusting Betty in your hands; you'll take good care of her."

"Yes, Mr. Hildebrand, I can certainly promise to do that," she began; then she broke off and looked away as though regretting that she had said even that much.

"That's all I want," I said, "and I'm glad we understand each other." I made a half motion to offer my hand, but she did not appear to notice the gesture, and we parted. Again I felt a twinge of disquietude, but the affair had been decided, and it was too late to reopen the discussion. A strange creature was Eunice Trevor, but I believe even now that she did love Betty Graeme. If only she had never looked into John Thaneford's baleful black eyes!

As I have said before, my marriage to Betty took place in the last part of December. We went to Aiken for the honeymoon, intending to be back at the "Hundred" for the Christmas holidays. But we had been gone only four days when we were recalled by Mrs. Anthony's fatal attack of pneumonia. She died on December the twenty-third, and the holly wreaths and mistletoe remained unhung for our first Christmas in the old homestead, while the festivities of the

season had to be confined to the servants' hall and the quarters. But we had Chalmers Warriner and Doctor Marcy in for dinner, and in my heart of hearts I was not sorry that the big, county family functions had to be postponed indefinitely. I am a quiet person, and I best enjoy my happiness when there is no one to look on. A selfish attitude perhaps, but I try to pay my debts to humanity in other ways. Generally Betty sees to it that I do so.

In February "Thane Court" was sold at auction, and I bought it in. The property marched with that of the "Hundred," and being so well rid of one objectionable neighbor I had no mind to run any chances. Moreover, the land was of excellent quality, impoverished, it is true, by want of care and scientific cropping, but still capable of revival under reasonable management. I had bid it in for a price far under its real value, and I could easily get a tenant in case I concluded not to farm it myself. The house was old and in poor condition, and I determined to pull it down in the spring.

But I was spared the trouble, for one windy night in March I was awakened by the light pressure of Betty's hand on my shoulder. "There is a big fire over in the west," she said excitedly, "and I think it must be 'Thane Court.'"

I scrambled into some clothes, summoned all the men within reach, and made the best of my way to the scene of the conflagration, rather more than a mile distant.

Betty was right. "Thane Court" was on fire, and it was evident, at a glance, that the house was doomed. Buckets and handpumps were useless, and long before the fire apparatus from Calverton could cover the ten miles of rutted, frozen roads the edifice had been reduced to a smoking ruin.

It was three or four days later before we could venture to explore the smouldering debris. The furniture and other interior fittings were old and of no great value; all, of course, had been totally destroyed. The only thing left intact was a small safe, which I was informed, had stood in the room used by the elder Thaneford as an office. Now John Thaneford had not appeared at the sale, nor had he taken any steps to protect what interests he still retained in the estate. Everything in and about "Thane Court" had become my legal property, and so I had no hesitation in ordering the safe taken over to the "Hundred," it being my intention to open it and examine the contents. Of course any personal property would belong to John Thaneford, and I was quite sure of my own good faith in the matter. It might be impossible to locate the missing owner for some time to

come, but we could cross that bridge when we came to it.

The safe was of comparatively modern workmanship, and seemed to have suffered no damage from its ordeal by fire. It was equipped with the usual numbered dial lock, and, naturally, I did not possess the combination. I could have sent for a safe expert from Baltimore, but the expense would have been considerable. Or mechanics from Calverton could have forced an opening by means of the oxygen flame, but so violent a procedure would have destroyed the safe itself, and I was not quite certain that I had the right to take such drastic action. True, John Thaneford had abandoned his property, and everything had been sold without reserve; nevertheless, I wanted to be sure of my ground before going further.

The safe had been thoroughly cleansed, and now stood temporarily under the principal staircase. I never passed it without an inquiring glance; somehow Betty and I could not resist the temptation of speculating about it; we were as curious as children, ever intent upon discovering what secrets it might hold. But how to find the key to the mystery?

And then one evening Betty had a brilliant idea. "Do you remember," she asked, "a series of numbers that I got from Mr. Thaneford the day he died?"

"Of course." I pulled out my note-book, and read the formula aloud: "1-4-2-4-8."

"He certainly wanted to tell me something," persisted Betty. "Why shouldn't it have been the very combination we are looking for?"

"Easy enough to find out," I answered. I went over to the safe, knelt down and took hold of the knob. Betty stood at my elbow, the note-book in her hand. "Ready?" she asked. "The numbers are: 1-4-2-4-8."

I turned the knob, counting the clicks as they passed. The door yielded and swung open.

Not much of a find after all—nothing but a leather-bound book resembling a diary in appearance. One of the covers had been slightly scorched by the intense heat, but the MS. seemed to be in excellent condition. I opened the book, scanned two or three lines, and looked up at Betty, who was leaning over my shoulder.

"Why it's just a jumble of letters!" she exclaimed in poignant disappointment. "I can't read a word of it; what does it mean?"

"Undoubtedly written in cypher," I replied. We looked at one another and laughed. Here indeed was an anti-climax.

Chapter XIII

Le Chiffre Indéchiffrable

During the world war I had been on duty in the intelligence department, and I had taken much interest in the science of cryptography, although not connected personally with the handling of cypher despatches. I could therefore explain to Betty that cypher systems fall under four general heads.

1. The giving to words, or groups of letters, a purely arbitrary significance.

2. The use of mechanical transformers in the shape of a screen or grid.

3. The substitution of numbers or other symbols for the original characters.

4. The transposition of letters according to a constant formula.

"Obviously," I began, "the example before our eyes—long lines of letters without breaks or marks of punctuation—does not come under the first heading. It contains no recognizable words, or phonetic groups, which might correspond in the code book to actual sentences. For example, in the ordinary commercial systems, the word *Barbarian* may mean: 'The wheat market is advancing.' But if I cable the word *Civilisation* I really intend to say: 'Australian wool crop is a failure.' The principal value of the elaborate code system is in the saving of cable tolls, a single word conveying the meaning of an entire sentence. It is necessary, of course, that all of the correspondents should possess individual copies of the code, and loss or theft of the book discloses the whole secret. Do you understand?"

Betty thought she did, and seemed so interested that I was emboldened to assume my best lecture manner.

"Under the second head we may consider the mechanical device known as the grid, grille, or screen.

"The instrument in question consists of a plate, usually made of metal, pierced by a number of holes of different sizes and irregularly spaced. When the writer sets out to prepare his message he lays the grid on the paper, and marks in the letters making up the words of his despatch through the apertures. Then the

screen is removed, and the blank spaces are filled up with writing which has nothing to do with the real subject matter, the process being repeated until the entire message has been coded. The recipient is provided with a precisely similar grid. By applying it to the communication he is then able to read, through the holes, the text of the secret message. The ancient Romans used a variation of this method, somewhat as follows. A long strip of paper was wound spirally about a cylinder or cone; the writing was then done parallel with the axis of the metal form. When unrolled, the communication seemed to be made up of arbitrary signs really parts of letters which were entirely unintelligible. The recipient, however, by rewinding the strip on a precisely similar form, would be able to read the message.

"Of course we may rule out the mechanical device. In this case we have a long communication of several hundred words, and the grille would be impracticable —too wasteful of space."

"That disposes of No. 2," said Betty hopefully. "What next?"

"In class 3 the coded message consists of numbers, or even of pure symbols—stars and daggers or what not. The latter variation is generally pure substitution, and may be called kindergarten cryptology. No one but a rank amateur would employ such a system.

"In the numeral code each correspondent is supplied with a dictionary, the same edition of course. Each word of the original message is represented by a group of five numbers, two designating the location of the required word on the page, and the remaining three denoting the number of the page itself. The process, both of coding and of uncoding, is very laborious, and hardly pays for the trouble involved. Another way to use the two dictionaries is to interpret the words of the code message by substituting other words removed a certain definite distance up or down the column. Suppose it is agreed that 'fifteen down' shall be the key, and that the despatch, as received, reads: *Bull Collier*. The recipient takes his copy of the dictionary, looks up the word *Bull*, and counts down fifteen, getting the word *Buy*. Similarly, *Collier* gives him *Copper*, and the decoded message will mean: 'Buy copper.' Finally, we may use a predetermined series of numbers as a key formula. We then divide the message to be coded into the same number of letter groups, and work out an intricate transposition, reversing the process in order to decode."

"Rather makes your head ache," remarked Betty plaintively. "Besides, this

cypher doesn't use numbers at all."

"Right you are," I acquiesced, "and we are undoubtedly dealing with a system of the fourth order in which the letters are transposed according to a constant prearranged formula.

"Let us first consider the simple form; the regular substitution of one letter of the alphabet for another. For example, X always takes the place of E, while B invariably means T, and so on. Such cyphers are easily read by the expert, who works on the principle that all the letters of the English alphabet may be ranked on a numerical scale of average frequency in use. The letter E heads the list; consequently, if any particular symbol predominates in the message it must correspond to that hard-worked vowel. Again, as *the* is the commonest word group in the language we are quickly able to identify what stands for T and H. But this is quite too transparent a code for serious use."

"Then don't waste time over it," said my practical-minded wife. "Old Mr. Thaneford was not a foolish person."

I took a long look at the incomprehensible jumble of letters.

"There are any number of formulae," I went on, "by means of which we may effect a transposition of letters, the substitution being variable or irregular. For instance, the 'Checkerboard,' invented by the Russian nihilists, and similar devices, most of which depend for secrecy upon single or double key-words. Perhaps the cleverest system in this group is the cypher called by the French, 'Le Chiffre Indéchiffrable.'"

"'The Undecypherable Cypher,'" commented Betty. "Sounds rather hopeless."

"Well, you can decide for yourself if there is any reasonable possibility of unravelling it, unless you are lucky enough to stumble on the key-word."

"Try me," she challenged.

"To begin with, you write down the twenty-six letters of the English alphabet in a horizontal line, indenting it the space of a single letter."

"Indenting?"

"You'll understand when you see the diagram I'm preparing."

"Oh, you're making a magic square!"

"Yes. Now you repeat the process twenty-five times, the only difference being that all these other lines begin at the left-hand margin, each with a different letter in their strict alphabetical order. Your diagram will then look like this. For the present I am putting it in skeleton form:"

```
   A B C D E F G ..... W X Y
 A B C D E F G H ..... X Y Z
 B C D E F G H I ..... Y Z A
 C D E F G H I J ..... Z A B
 D E F G H I J K ..... A B C
 E F G H I J K L ..... B C D
 F G H I J K L M ..... C D E
 . . . . . .....  . . .
 . . . . . .....  . . .
 W X Y Z A B C D ..... T U V
 X Y Z A B C D E ..... U V W
 Y Z A B C D E F ..... V W X
```

"Now choose a key-word, or preferably, a key-sentence. For simplicity's sake, we'll take the short word: BEAD, and suppose we wish to send in cypher the message: CAB FEED."

"Which is pure nonsense."

"Granted. I merely select two words at random which can be coded on my incomplete square. If I had the whole diagram drawn out the message could be anything you like."

"Go on," commanded Betty, her eyes snapping.

"First you write down your message; then above it you put the key-word, repeated in whole or in part as many times as may be necessary, thus:"

```
B E A  D B E A
C A B  F E E D
```

"Turning to the diagram you find B, the first letter of the key-word, in the top horizontal line; and C, the first letter of the word to be put into code, in the left-hand vertical line. Now look for the letter at the intersection of the vertical

column headed by B and the horizontal line which C begins. You will find it to be E. Set this down as the first symbol of your cypher message, and obtain the other letters in a similar manner. Your despatch will then read: E F C J G J E. As an object lesson, place these letters under your original arrangement of key-word and message, thus:"

B E A D B E A
C A B F E E D
E F C J G J E

"You see at a glance that the substitution is irregular and variant. For example, the symbol E stands for both C and D. Again, the letter E in the word F E E D is at one time represented by G and secondly by J."

"How do you translate the cypher?" asked Betty.

"Merely reverse the process. You write down the cypher message, and above it as many letters of your key-word as may be needed, thus:"

B E A D B E A
E F C J G J E

"Now follow down the vertical column headed by B until you reach the symbol letter E; then move your pointer over left to the end of that horizontal line which will give you C, the first letter of the original message. Understand?"

Betty tried her hand, and quickly caught the trick; really it was very easy.

"One more point; it is better not to divide the cypher message into word groups as the continuous string of letters looks more mystifying. There is no difficulty in picking out the sense when decoding."

"Finally, you notice that the upper left-hand space in the diagram is vacant; consequently you must not use the letter Z in either the key-word or in the message to be coded. But this restriction is not of any practical disadvantage, Z being a letter that is seldom used. It will often appear, of course, in the cypher itself."

"Certainly it is all very simple," remarked Betty.

"But without the key-word where would you get off?"

"I don't see how anybody could possibly work it out; why the complications are absolutely overwhelming."

"And you can make them still more intricate by merely using a longer key-word, or indeed a whole sentence. For example: 'I love Betty Hildebrand.'"

"Everybody knows that," retorted Betty. "Still I don't mind an occasional restatement of the established fact. Please, Hugh! I spent any amount of time in getting those ruffles starched just so."

Betty took the diagram and carefully tucked it away in a drawer of her secretary. "Of course we can't be sure that old Mr. Thaneford really used 'Le Chiffre Indéchiffrable,'" she said thoughtfully.

"Only a possibility," I agreed.

"And without the key-word or key-sentence we shall never be any wiser than we are."

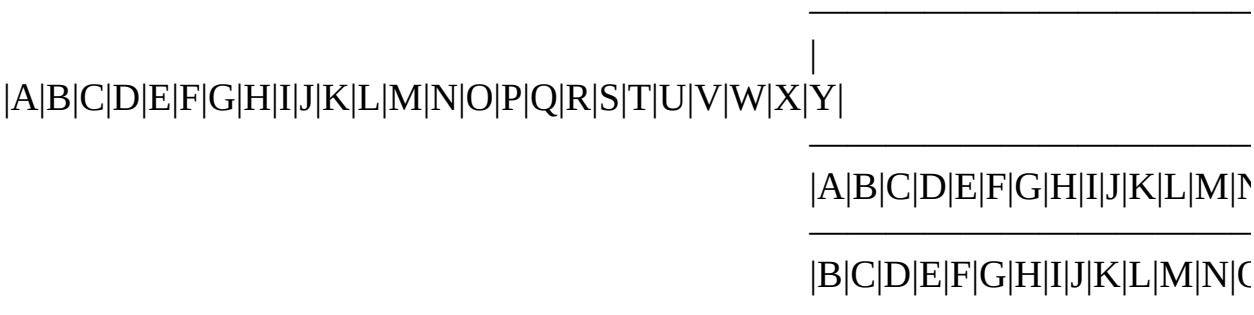
"Granted again."

"So there you are. Just the same, Hugh, I wish you would make me a complete diagram; I'd like to experiment with it."

"I'll do it for you to-night. Here's your precious diary."

Betty kissed me and went upstairs. It took me the best part of an hour to draw out the diagram in full; then I had to mount it on cardboard so as to keep it in good condition for constant handling. For the benefit of the curious-minded I reproduce it below:

LE CHIFFRE INDÉCHIFFRABLE



|C|D|E|F|G|H|I|J|K|L|M|N|O|P|

|D|E|F|G|H|I|J|K|L|M|N|O|P|Q|

|E|F|G|H|I|J|K|L|M|N|O|P|Q|R|

|F|G|H|I|J|K|L|M|N|O|P|Q|R|S|

|G|H|I|J|K|L|M|N|O|P|Q|R|S|T|

|H|I|J|K|L|M|N|O|P|Q|R|S|T|U|

|I|J|K|L|M|N|O|P|Q|R|S|T|U|V|

|J|K|L|M|N|O|P|Q|R|S|T|U|V|W|

|K|L|M|N|O|P|Q|R|S|T|U|V|W|X|

|L|M|N|O|P|Q|R|S|T|U|V|W|X|Y|

|M|N|O|P|Q|R|S|T|U|V|W|X|Y|Z|

|N|O|P|Q|R|S|T|U|V|W|X|Y|Z|A|

|O|P|Q|R|S|T|U|V|W|X|Y|Z|A|B|

|P|Q|R|S|T|U|V|W|X|Y|Z|A|B|C|

|Q|R|S|T|U|V|W|X|Y|Z|A|B|C|D|

|R|S|T|U|V|W|X|Y|Z|A|B|C|D|E|

|S|T|U|V|W|X|Y|Z|A|B|C|D|E|F|

|T|U|V|W|X|Y|Z|A|B|C|D|E|F|G|

|U|V|W|X|Y|Z|A|B|C|D|E|F|G|H|

|V|W|X|Y|Z|A|B|C|D|E|F|G|H|

|W|X|Y|Z|A|B|C|D|E|F|G|H|I|

|X|Y|Z|A|B|C|D|E|F|G|H|I|J|K

|Y|Z|A|B|C|D|E|F|G|H|I|J|K|L

Note that while the diagram is a necessary piece of machinery in using this particular cypher system, it has no value in itself; the whole secret depends upon the possession of the key-word or key-sentence. As this may easily be memorized by the two correspondents there is no risk of discovery through the accident of loss or theft.

Chapter XIV

Another Break in the Circle

It was the first of June and the loveliest time of the year at the "Hundred." Why had I never realized before that, in spite of my urban upbringing, I was a born countryman? Can there be a greater pleasure in life than living on one's own land, and honestly plying the oldest and most important of human industries—the tilling of the soil! Provided, of course, that one possesses a reasonable amount of capital; the hand-to-mouth struggle of the poor farmer is deadening to both soul and body; as one of my less fortunate neighbors once put it: "It isn't living; it's just staying on."

Certainly I had no cause for complaint. The "Hundred" was easily the best farm anywhere about. I could command sufficient ready money to be independent of the banks, and I was beginning to learn my trade. What more could the heart of man desire? And finally, there was Betty—but how could one inventory that immeasurable asset! Enough that our happiness was as complete as anything mundane could be, and I had only to bear in mind the old Greek admonition: "Tread softly lest the high gods overhear and be moved to celestial ire against a mortal so felicitous!"

Eunice Trevor was still living at the "Hundred," and the question of that other arrangement had been suffered to remain in abeyance. I did not fancy the ungracious task of turning her out of the house, and by temperament I am something of an opportunist; time is the great resolver of our difficulties; moreover, to do the woman justice, she seemed desirous of effacing herself in every possible way; for days on end I would hardly see her except at dinner, our one formal function. And then one day something occurred to set me thinking, an incident small in itself and yet curiously disquieting.

Miss Trevor was in the habit of driving over alone to Calverton two or three times a week. Still she was never absent more than a couple of hours, and it was none of my business how she employed her leisure. Betty commented upon these journeys once or twice, but neither of us cared to press the direct inquiry; there were plenty of horses available, and the girl's time was her own; what did it matter.

On this particular morning I chanced to be in the house at the moment of her return from town. She passed me in the hall, nodded briefly, and went up to her room. As I walked through the front door I noticed a letter lying on the threshold. I picked it up and saw that it was addressed to Miss Eunice Trevor, Lockbox 31, Calverton, Maryland. The handwriting was that of John Thaneford, a square, bold script with which I was perfectly familiar. The post-mark was that of a small town in Florida.

So Eunice and Thaneford were engaged in correspondence, and a secret one at that. It didn't look well, and I felt the blood reddening my temples. After all she was my house guest and eating my bread and salt. Spy is an ugly word, but Thaneford was an enemy, a quiescent one for the time being, yet none the less to be guarded against. "Hildebrand Hundred" was a goodly heritage, and it would have been his had it not been for my fortuitous meeting with Francis Graeme. There were no immediate prospects that Betty would present me with an heir to the property, and I realized guiltily that I had put off the duty of making a will. Suppose that I died intestate and without issue. Betty would have her dower rights, but Thaneford could put in a plausible claim for recognition as next of kin. I made instant resolve that I would see Mr. Eldon on the morrow and erect every possible legal safeguard to conserve Betty's interests. I could rest assured that if Thaneford were able to get enough ready money he would fight for his alleged rights. In the meantime, I could do nothing but let the letter lie where it had fallen. I whistled to Gyp and strode off to the stables. At the corner of the hedge I ventured to look back, and caught just a glimpse of feminine drapery disappearing into the cavernous gloom of the great hall door. So my lady had discovered her loss, and had been prompt in retrieving her property. Very well, but I should certainly call on Mr. Eldon in the morning.

But, as it so often happens, my fine resolutions came to naught, and six hours later I was on my way North, summoned by wire to the bedside of my only living relative, my good Aunt Livy Marston, who had been more than a mother to me for the best part of my life. Dear old lady! She finally won her battle with death, but it was not until nearly three weeks later that the doctors pronounced her to be out of danger, and I was free to return home; to be precise, it was on Monday night, June the twenty-second, that I left for Maryland, arriving at our little station of Crown Ferry late in the afternoon of the following day.

To my surprise Doctor Marcy, with his gig, was waiting for me. One glance at his face was enough. I tried to speak, but a great fear clutched at my throat.

"Betty is perfectly well," said Marcy hastily. "She sends her love, and is expecting you at the 'Hundred.'"

I threw my traveling bag in behind, and climbed to my place at his side; the doctor's whiplash flickered along the blue-roan's broad back, and we were quickly out of earshot, so far as the station loungers were concerned.

"Who is it then?" I asked.

"Eunice Trevor."

"Yes."

"She died day before yesterday—suddenly."

"An accident?"

"She was found dead, sitting in the library at the big, flat-topped desk," and Doctor Marcy shot me a sharp glance from the remote corner of his eye.

"You mean that her death recalls the mystery of Francis Graeme's taking off?"

"Just that."

"Go on and tell me the whole story, doctor. There's no need for us to beat about the bush."

"But it's so little I have to tell," protested Marcy. "The bare facts are these:"

"I was coming back from Lynn Saturday, and, on passing your gate, I thought I would drive in and ask Betty for a cup of tea. Lucky I did so, for I found her in a great state of mind. It seems that early in the morning Eunice had shut herself up in the library on the plea of doing some writing. She did not appear in the dining room at one o'clock, the luncheon hour, and Effingham reported that the door was locked on the inside. He had knocked repeatedly without getting any reply.

"Well, you can understand how all this recalled to Betty the peculiar circumstances surrounding Graeme's death. And the servants were scared out of their very wits; you know by this time the psychological vagaries of the African mind.

"There was only one thing to do. I had Effingham produce his master-key, and the door was opened. The room seemed to be in perfect order—absolutely no signs of a struggle of any kind. When I passed the screen—that same leather

screen—I saw the girl. She was sitting in the swivel-chair, but her head had fallen forward on the table. The body was still warm, but she was stone dead."

"Any marks of violence?" I asked, thinking of the wound on Francis Graeme's forehead.

"None whatever."

"When did all this happen?"

"To-day is Monday the twenty-second. As I told you, the day was Saturday the twentieth. By the way, you never received Betty's telegram?"

"No, it must have reached Bangor just after I left. Probably, it never occurred to Aunt Livy to have it relayed to me on the train."

"No great matter. There was nothing to be done but to put the poor girl decently away."

"You mean that you've had the funeral?"

"Yes, this morning. We could get no word of you, and I rather pushed it on Betty's account."

"Was there an autopsy?"

"I couldn't see any reason for it. The general indications were those of cerebral hemorrhage, and I had no hesitation in giving apoplexy as the cause of death. Yes, I know I changed my mind about Graeme, but in this case there could be no doubt about it."

"She seemed to be in excellent general health," I remarked. "Had you ever noticed any premonitory signs—you know what I am trying to say?"

"I never had Miss Trevor as a patient," said Marcy, "and so I can't give any definite opinion."

"But you wouldn't put her down—I mean on the strength of your general observation—as predisposed to that sort of thing?"

"No, I shouldn't."

"You said virtually the same thing about my Cousin Francis."

"I admit it. Still in that case the presence of an external wound gave ample justification for going further."

"Just one or two more questions. Was the postern-door closed?"

"Tight as a safety vault. You and Betty have the only keys in existence that unlock it."

"How about the pridellas in the windows—the little ventilating apertures?"

"They were all shut, too. Afterwards I spoke to Warriner about that very point, and he confirmed my impression."

"Warriner!"

"He arrived at the 'Hundred' very soon after I did. I believe they were going horseback riding."

An unworthy thought crossed my mind, but I did my best to stamp it out of existence. Perhaps Betty had been feeling lonely during my long absence from home—perhaps.

"There's one thing more," continued the doctor. "Eunice had been writing, and there were a number of sheets of MS. lying on the desk. Betty had them sealed up, pending your return."

"Nothing has been heard of John Thaneford, I suppose?"

"Not that I know of."

I relapsed into silence, and presently we were at the house. Betty was waiting for me on the portico, and behind her loomed up the tall figure of Chalmers Warriner. I took my dear girl in my arms, and the tears came speedily to her relief; after all, Eunice Trevor had been her cousin and childhood playmate.

Betty went to her room, and Doctor Marcy had to keep a professional engagement. Warriner and I had a whiskey-and-soda apiece, and over it discussed the meager details of the distressing occurrence.

"Darker than ever," I remarked, when he had finished with his version of the affair.

"It does look that way," he admitted. "Understand, there is no evidence of suicide."

"So Marcy said."

"Her written statement may shed some light."

"You had better stay to dinner," I suggested, "and go over it with us."

Warriner assented with such friendly frankness that I felt a little ashamed of my somewhat perfunctory invitation. But perhaps he had not noticed the lack of cordiality in my voice. At any rate, he stayed, and the dinner passed off tolerably enough. After dessert I proposed an adjournment to the library for coffee, but Betty objected. "I couldn't sit in that room," she protested earnestly. So we compromised on the big living room on the left of the hall as one enters. I took the packet Betty handed me, and broke the seal. A dozen or more sheets of note-paper, written in pencil, fell out.

"It's a rather difficult handwriting," said Betty, "and I suppose I'm more familiar with it than either of you men." So Warriner and I lit our cigars and prepared to listen.

Chapter XV

One Corner of the Veil

The MS. began abruptly, without either preamble or address:

I am sitting here in the library of "Hildebrand Hundred"—the room in which five men have met their death—and while I am waiting I shall set down certain data and figures which should prove of more than ordinary interest to anyone who has the wit to discern their underlying meaning. But judge for yourselves.

The Hildebrands have been at the "Hundred" since the settlement of the province by the Calverts. All of the earlier generations were decent, God-fearing, hard-drinking country squires who died respectably with their boots off, and are now sleeping quietly in S. Saviour's churchyard; honest gentlemen no doubt, but a little dull after their bucolic kind. Then we come to something different. But first let us set down the roster of the five who did not pass away comfortably in their beds. Here it is:

Yardley Hildebrand, elder son of Oliver Hildebrand; succeeded his father, 1860; died, 1861; aged fifty-five; no issue.

Randall Hildebrand, younger son of Oliver; succeeded his brother, 1861; died, 1862; aged fifty-three; left issue.

Horace Hildebrand, elder son of Randall; succeeded his father, 1862; died, 1865; aged thirty-five; no issue.

Richard Hildebrand, younger son of Randall; succeeded his brother, 1865; died, 1918; aged eighty-three; no issue.

Francis Hildebrand Graeme, great-nephew to Richard; succeeded his great-uncle, 1918; died, 1919; aged forty-five; no issue.

Now as we analyze these dates and periods we come upon some curious coincidences; and also, upon some marked discrepancies. For example, Yardley Hildebrand reigned for one brief year, and the same is true of Randall Hildebrand and of Francis Graeme. But Horace enjoyed three full years of sovereignty, while Richard was Hildebrand of the "Hundred" for no less a period than fifty and three years. Yet all five went to their death along an unfrequented road, and no man can say of a certainty what was the essential damnation of their taking-off. They died, and they died alone—here in this very room where I sit waiting, waiting.

I dare say that you, Hugh Hildebrand, will read what I have written here, and I have now a word for your ear alone. Not long ago John Thaneford gave you your choice—Betty or the "Hundred." You could not have both.

Well, you possess your wife; take her and go in peace; stay, and you do so at your unending peril. I leave you this warning merely to clear the ground for the assertion of John Thaneford's rights in the estate; they will be defended, and all the odds are against you. So I warn you, but it would be idle for me to pretend to any philanthropic motive, and there is but small show of friendship between us. You have treated me with courtesy, even with kindness, and I am not unmindful of the obligation imposed upon me. But I must be perfectly frank: you are in the way; either you go of your own volition, or you will be removed—at the appointed time. It may be in one year, or in three years, or in three and fifty years; upon that point I cannot speak definitely. But there was only one man out of the five who drew a long straw—remember that.

Neither have I any cause of quarrel with you, Cousin Betty Graeme. You have been very good to a poor and proud relation; and what little measure of human affections I had left over—after John Thaneford had turned me inside out, like an old glove, and flung me on the dust heap—was truly given to you. Believe me, then, when I tell you that if your happiness is bound up with the life of your husband, there is but one way of preserving it; you must persuade him to relinquish "Hildebrand Hundred," and be content with the ready money and the personal property specifically bequeathed in Francis Graeme's will. I dare say you will have difficulty in bringing this about; men are so ridiculously stubborn and unwilling to take a woman's advice that I do not expect to see my counsel followed. But when the blow does fall do me the favor to remember that I gave you fair and honorable warning.

This is not a confession. It is true that Cousin Francis Graeme came to his death through violence, but I had no share in it, direct or indirect. Seeing that I am waiting to follow him over the same dark and unfrequented road that he has already traveled, I can speak no more and no less than the truth.

At the same time I have no hesitation in admitting the essential correctness of the deductions offered by Chalmers Warriner as to my share in what happened posterior to the event. I was on the library terrace that Tuesday noon, and I did receive a message from Sugar Loaf that the way was clear for me to enter the library and secure the will which disinherited John Thaneford. I don't like dead men, but I am not afraid of them, and I should have examined the despatch-box on the spot had I not been disturbed by the knocking at the door—I mean the effort of the negro peddler, Dave Campion, to gain access to Mr. Graeme. Then it occurred to me that as I should have to leave by the postern-door, as I had entered, it might prove useful in the future to cover my trail. Accordingly, I

snatched, at random, a cocoon from the case, dabbed it with library gum, and stuck it in place over the crack, just as Mr. Warriner was clever enough to figure out.

But I had run the risk to no purpose; the new will was not in the despatch-box, and John Thaneford would be disinherited after all. Then I reflected that it was a bare possibility that Cousin Francis had postponed the making of the new will; in this case the earlier testament would remain in force. Obviously, I must get the despatch-box containing it back in the library before any formal examination should be made of the surroundings. My chance came unexpectedly when Effingham was left on guard at the library door. As you already know, I sent him upstairs on an errand, having first secured from him the master-key. I re-entered the library, put the box back in its original position, and was standing quietly at the door when Betty and Doctor Marcy arrived.

While it is true that the signal came to me from John Thaneford it is not necessary to jump to the conclusion that he had a hand in bringing about Francis Graeme's death, either as principal or accessory. He did know that it was about to happen, but nothing more; I say this upon my own responsibility, and to the best of my knowledge and belief. You will give me credence in this matter, realizing that I owe little of love to the Thaneford name.

Yet I will try and be just to John Thaneford, for, brute though he be, I do believe that he loved me after his fashion; yes, and would have made me his wife had not his heart been turned against me by his father—may the soul of Fielding Thaneford dwell in darkness for evermore!

Let us premise that the elder Thaneford was jealous of me and of my influence over John. The old man was determined that some day his son should be lord of "Hildebrand Hundred," and if John should marry Betty Graeme his object would be automatically attained. And so Fielding Thaneford did the devil's work, and I was cast out; the very fact that I had given to John Thaneford all that a woman has to give was subtly twisted against me; my very sacrifice was plain proof of my unworthiness to be an honorable man's wife. Do you wonder now that I had no love for Fielding Thaneford. You, Hugh Hildebrand, surprised me one day while I was taking the afternoon relief for Miss Davenport. Before that particular occasion I had been content with inventing purely material means for disturbing the sick man's repose. I used to throw his medicine out of the window, under his very eyes, and then force him to go through the solemn mockery of swallowing doses of plain water. Or, on a warm, damp day, when the flies were particularly

troublesome, I would put a saucer containing treacle close by his pillow, and then sit, comfortably fanning myself, on the opposite side of the room. Horrible! you say, but I tell you that Fielding Thaneford was a devil; I was only anticipating by a little space his doom of eternal torment.

And then, on the particular day of which we were speaking, I discovered how cruelly mere eyes could sting and burn. And so I sat and looked at Fielding Thaneford, and laughed to see him writhe like a beetle impaled upon a pin. But you came in and spoiled my amusement.

There isn't much more for me to say or tell, nor am I very sure how much time is left me in which to make my final warning clear. Whatever was the nature of Fielding Thaneford's secret he has taken it with him to the grave. So far as I know, he said nothing more definite to his son John than that he should possess his soul in patience, and then all things should come to him. But he also intimated plainly that he had foreseen how Yardley, and Randall, and Horace, and Richard Hildebrand should die; and it was at his suggestion that John Thaneford sat that day at the observation point on Sugar Loaf, and waited for death to come to Francis Graeme.

Hypothetically, that death was due to natural causes—hypothetically! Or possibly there was someone who entered that postern-door before I did, and struck a foul blow—possibly! Or perhaps, John Thaneford, from his safe retreat on Sugar Loaf, may have been able to direct some hitherto unknown form of lethal attack—a tiny shell charged with a poison gas of instantaneous deadliness, or a devouring blast from a flame-thrower of unexampled precision—perhaps!

But, frankly, none of these hypotheses appear to me to be tenable; the mystery does not lie so plainly on the surface. Moreover, I believe that the heart of the Terror continues to beat in this very place, the library of "Hildebrand Hundred," where I am sitting. Something is in this room, something that is eternally menacing and eternally patient. It may be in one year and it may be in three and fifty years that it chooses to strike, but strike it surely will and no art or cunning will avail to avert the blow. Yes, there is *something* here, the *something* for which I myself am waiting. But search as you will, you shall not find the Terror; you must await its coming as I am doing. Fielding Thaneford has gone to his own place, but his works of darkness remain behind him.

There is just one more thing that I might tell you, but I shall not do it—you would then seek to compromise the situation, and that I will not have. I put my

own wits to work and so was able to lift one corner of the veil; that is why I wait so confidently to-day for that which will surely come.

And so I leave you but the one door to safety—the abandonment of the "Hundred" to John Thaneford, the same "Black Jack" Thaneford who once loved me and who finally cast me off. This is the last thing I can do for him—for him whom I both hate and love to the death. Why? Ask any woman——

The MS. had ended as abruptly as it had begun. I took the sheets from Betty's hand, arranged them in order, and put the bundle in my pocket. "I don't think we had better discuss this any further to-night," I said decisively.

"Quite right," assented Warriner. "Betty looks pretty white, and you have been traveling for two days. Let me know, at any time, if I can be of service."

We both of us accompanied Warriner to the porch, and saw him drive away. As we re-entered the hall the closed door of the library shone white and ghostly at the end of the passage.

"That horrible room!" panted Betty, her hand tight clutched on my arm. "I can never, never enter it again."

I tried to soothe her as best I could, but the poor girl's nerves had been badly overstrained, and it was a long time before I could get the upper hand of her hysterical mood. I positively refused to say one more word on the general subject of the tragedy, or the particular contents of Eunice Trevor's *ante mortem* statement; and, after a while, Betty gave in and was reasonable again. But both of us knew that the question had not been settled, that it was only postponed. And to-morrow it would return again to plague us.

Chapter XVI

Ad Interim

I never sent for Warriner to come and discuss Eunice Trevor's astonishing communication. Why? Well, what would have been the use? After all, the woman had told us little or nothing which we had not known already; certainly, there was no definite information in her statement upon which to base a working hypothesis. Granted that there was a guilty secret, it lay hidden for all time in S. Saviour's churchyard. Both Eunice Trevor and John Thaneford may have been innocent of any actual participation in the tragedy of Francis Graeme's death, but it was by no means clear that they could not have taken steps to prevent it. The coroner's jury had given their verdict, the magistrate had found no case against the one suspected person, Dave Campion, and there was really no valid warrant for reopening the inquiry. Besides, this was a purely family affair, and Chalmers Warriner was an outsider. I dare say it was despicably small-minded of me, but Betty was now my wife, and both she and Warriner ought to realize that the intimacy between them could not be continued on the old free footing. Jealous. Well perhaps, I was uneasily conscious of an unworthy feeling in the matter. But I was master of "Hildebrand Hundred," and surely I had the right to determine what friendships were desirable and what were not. Warriner was a man of mature age, Betty was young and impulsive; it was my bounden duty to guard her from every sidelong look, from every whispered word. Not that I ever discussed the question with her; I merely took my stand and it was her wifely obligation to yield to my judgment. So far as I could tell, she never even noticed that Warriner no longer came to the "Hundred" in the old informal way. And that was as it should be.

But the issues raised by Eunice Trevor's statement were not to be set aside so easily. It was annoying, but Betty persisted in taking the dead woman's warning both literally and seriously; she actually begged me to formally abandon the "Hundred" to John Thaneford, as the legal next-of-kin, and perhaps leave Maryland altogether.

This I could not consent to do; I was too proud, or perhaps too stubborn, to be frightened by the vaporings of a highly wrought and undoubtedly neurotic

imagination. There was not the shadow of a proof that Francis Graeme's death had been due to premeditated violence, and as for the alleged tragedies in the dim past, I neither knew nor cared anything about them. What if five men had died, under unexplained circumstances, in that particular room? All this was ancient history running back over a period of sixty odd years, and there are many coincidences in life. There is no greater tyranny than that of superstition, and once in bondage to its shadowy overlordship orderly existence becomes impossible.

But my decision had been finally influenced by a still stronger consideration. As I have said a little further back, I had unconsciously become attached to the "Hundred" by ties that I now found it impossible to break. This was my home and the home of my fathers before me; I now found myself an integral part of the ancestral homestead, my life had rooted deeply into the very soil, with its sacred dust my own corporeal remains must finally be mingled; no, I could not suffer "Hildebrand Hundred" to pass out of my hands, and I would hold it against every enemy visible and invisible. Even granting that something deadly and menacing did lurk in the dim corners of that great room with its painted windows and booklined walls, was I not man enough to grapple with the Terror on its own chosen ground? Better to die even as my Hildebrand forebears had died, alone and unafraid, than to drag out a coward's existence in some wretched backwater of life. Yes, I had decided; I would stay on at the "Hundred," *coute qui coute*.

It was not so easy to maintain my resolve in the face of Betty's quiet but determined opposition. I could make every allowance for the successive shocks to her delicately organized nervous system, and mere prayers and tears I was ready to cope with. But there was an invincible spirit in her attitude that I could not shake. "It is a part of my inner sense," she would reiterate with gentle obstinacy, and how can one argue rationally with feminine intuitions!

In the end we compromised—as always. It was agreed that we should continue to live on at the "Hundred," but the library should be permanently and effectually closed. Betty even proposed that a brick wall should be built at the end of the passage entirely blocking the entrance, but to this heroic measure I steadfastly refused to assent; it was enough of a nuisance to lose the use of the best room in the house, and to be obliged to transfer the working part of the library to the new living room. So we compromised again by locking the door and keeping all the keys in my immediate possession. In addition, I had to promise that I would not enter the room unless my wife was told of my intention and invited to accompany me. "At least we'll die together," said Betty, trying to smile through

her tears. What could I do but kiss them away, and give the required assurance.

In October of that same year our son was born. Of course Betty insisted that he should be christened Hugh, and while I have always thought the name an ugly one and should have preferred Lawrence, after the first American Hildebrand, it would have been most ungracious to have entered any demurrer. But when Betty furthermore suggested that Chalmers Warriner be invited to stand as godfather I made plausible objections in favor of Doctor Marcy. I fancied that she seemed unaccountably disappointed, but she yielded when she realized that my preference was a decided one. However, Warriner was present at the ceremony in S. Saviour's, and endowed the baby with a magnificent silver mug. That particular gift should have been the prerogative of the titular godfather, but Doctor Marcy did not seem inclined to stand upon his rights, and I could not act the churl in so small a matter. And so this epochal phase of my life had come to a triumphant close; possessed of "Hildebrand Hundred," a son to inherit my name, and the best wife in the world. What more could heart of man desire!

Chapter XVII

The Midsummer Night's Ball

And now I come to a certain chapter of my book of life which I would fain leave unwritten. But I am bound to set down the full truth, no matter how unpleasant the bare, ugly facts may be. No one can blame me more hardly than I did myself, and assuredly I was well punished for my misdoings. So here goes.

I had become jealous of Chalmers Warriner, bitterly, almost insanely jealous; and this in spite of my sober judgment, my real inner conviction of Betty's unswerving loyalty and wholehearted love. It is a humiliating confession for a man to make, but since I did play the fool to the top of my bent I ought to be willing to endure my penance; as it turned out, I came within an ace of paying the ultimate price of my folly. So much by way of *apologia pro mea culpa*.

The winter, spring and early summer had passed without incident. In June it occurred to me that it would be well if Betty were away from the "Hundred" for the period covered by the double tragedy of Francis Graeme's death and Eunice Trevor's mysterious taking-off. Accordingly, we went to the "Old White" for three weeks, returning to our home the first day of July. Betty had certainly been benefited by the change, and I hoped that the current of our family life was now to flow smoothly on for an indefinite length of time.

The immediate rock upon which our matrimonial barque proceeded to wreck itself was the Midsummer Night's ball at "Powersthorp" on August the fourth. As Hilda Powers was Betty's most intimate friend we had motored over early to assist in receiving the guests; half of King William county seemed to have been invited, and the crush was tremendous.

I was standing near the receiving line of ladies when Chalmers Warriner came up; and, in spite of my secret dislike and suspicion, I could not help thinking how distinguished looking he was—just the sort of man that a woman invariably favors with a second glance. And now he was lingering for that maddening hundredth part of a second over Betty's hand; I heard him whisper: "The supper waltz then?" and I saw Betty start and flush and finally nod a smiling assent. Ignoble of me to be standing there, actually spying on my own wife! I admit the

justice of your censure, dear reader, but have you ever endured even the smallest pang of the jealous man's agony? One ought to be competent to testify in this particular court.

I suppose I went through the ordinary motions of a man attending a ball; I have a vague recollection of dancing at least half a dozen times; I comforted innumerable elderly dowagers and flagons of near-claret cup, and encouraged several flappers to venture on their first cigarette in the friendly dusk of the pleached lime alley; I even played one rubber of auction with the colonel, the commodore, and the judge, while they were awaiting the arrival of the rector to make up their accustomed coterie. But my eyes were always fixed on the big clock at the end of the hall; according to our simple country fashion supper was invariably scheduled for midnight, and was preceded by the principal waltz number of the dance program.

There it came at last! the opening bars of Strauss's "On the Beautiful Blue Danube." Why is it that smiles and tears lie so close together in the lilt and swing of a fine waltz tune? And, by that same token, the saddest music in all the world to-day is that same "Blue Danube," the last, faint exhalation of an old regime that, however rotten at its core, continued to present a lovely and gracious exterior. At least there were no war-brides and greasy Israelitish profiteers on the polished boards of the ancient Hofberg when Maestro Johann raised his baton, and his incomparable band, in their gay Hussar uniforms, breathed out the intoxicating melody which the great Brahms himself would not have been ashamed to have composed, the veritable apotheosis of the dance.

Gone, all gone! and this old, gray world, albeit made safe for democracy, has yet lost something of perennial beauty and enchantment that can never be renewed —a broken spell, a vanished vision. The wax candles have guttered to their sockets, the shimmering waves of color are graying under the merciless white light of a proletarian dawn, the haunting violins have sobbed themselves to sleep; and of all that brilliant, bewildering, phantasmagoric past there remains but one poignant and exquisite echo—the "Blue Danube."

I watched Betty as she circled past me held close in the hollow of Warriner's arm; she was looking up at him, her eyes intent and her cheeks glowing. I pushed through the throng and caught them temporarily halted in a re-entrant swirl of dancers. "I'll take the rest of this turn," I announced, with small pretense of civility. Warriner would have been fully justified in resenting my rudeness, for this was no ordinary case of give-and-take cutting in; but he instantly

relinquished his claim, and I whirled Betty away to the farther end of the great hall. "We won't wait for supper," I said curtly. "You know Hilda well enough for that, and she won't mind. Or I don't care if she does." Betty's lower lip went out and her eyes flashed. But a woman, in an emergency, can summon a control over her nerves that mere man may only wonder at. "As you like, Hugh," she said with quiet composure. "I'll just slip up to the dressing room, and you can have the motor brought around to the side door, where it won't be noticed."

We exchanged only a few, indifferent words on the way home, since Zack was acting as chauffeur and sat within easy earshot.

Betty confronted me under the swinging hall lantern of "Hildebrand Hundred," her small figure straight and tense as a grenadier on parade. "Well?" she said briefly.

"You know what I mean," I evaded weakly enough. But she only continued to look at me, and I had to come out in the open.

"I object to your dancing with that man," I growled.

"What man?"

"Chalmers Warriner, of course."

"Chalmers Warriner! Why——" Betty bit her lip and choked back the coming words.

"Go on!" I demanded, instantly alert to the possible significance of that suddenly checked utterance.

But Betty only shook her head—mutinously so as I chose to think in my green-eyed madness.

"You won't tell me?" I persisted hotly.

"I can't."

"Then I've nothing more to say except just this: You are my wife, and so long as you continue to bear my name you are to have no communication of any kind with Mr. Warriner."

Betty made no reply, and we parted without another word.

I had to be in Calverton all the following day on some law business; and I had

left the "Hundred" before Betty appeared at the breakfast table. When I returned, late in the afternoon, the house was fairly upside down with hurried preparations for a departure; everywhere trunks and handbags were being packed for the journey, and the station car was already in waiting at the front door. Betty met me as usual in the lower hall. I lifted my eyebrows interrogatively.

"You know little Hugh has been feeling the hot weather of late," she answered steadily, "and Doctor Marcy strongly advised a change to a Northern climate."

"Where are you going?"

"To my Aunt Alice Crew's in Stockbridge. We can stay there through August and September."

"And then?"

"Probably to the Davidsons at Irvington-on-Hudson."

"For how long?"

"That depends on you, Hugh." Betty was actually smiling as she looked up at me, and that made me angrier than ever.

"You mean until I am ready to trust you," I blurted out.

"If you like to put it that way."

The discussion had let us into an *impasse*; there was nothing more to be said. I accompanied Betty to the Crown Ferry station, and saw my little family party of wife, baby, and nurse safely aboard the sleeper. Even at that last moment I should have dropped everything and gone along had Betty given me the smallest opening. But she said no further word, and I could not conquer at once my masculine pride and my jealous fear. I watched the red tail lights of the train disappear around a curve, and told myself that I was the unhappiest man and the biggest fool on God's green earth.

Chapter XVIII

I Break a Promise

Needless to say that the summer dragged heavily with me. Betty wrote regularly, but her letters were of a strictly impersonal nature, and I took especial care to answer in the same vein. Luckily, there was little Hugh as a point of common interest, and we made the most of it. But neither of us offered the least allusion to the real crisis in our relations. I was frankly and wretchedly unhappy, and I could only hope that Betty was no better satisfied with the situation. I kept busy, of course, with the care of the estate. There was a new drainage system to be installed, and the long neglected acres of "Thane Court" to look after. Of Warriner I heard little and saw less. He was busy with his laboratory work at Calverton, and there was really small opportunity for us to meet. Indeed for months we lived as rigidly apart as though at opposite poles; once I ran across him at a granger meeting in Lynn, and again on a cold, rainy afternoon in October when I chanced to drop in at "Powersthorp" for a cup of tea. I fancied that there was marked restraint in his manner as I walked into Hilda Powers' drawing room, but in the presence of an hostess the amenities must be preserved, and we managed to rub along for the half hour of my stay. I was annoyed, nevertheless, for I had been hoping for a confidential chat with Hilda about Betty, knowing that the two corresponded regularly. Illogically enough, I charged up my disappointment to Warriner, and disliked him more hotly than ever. I dare say he divined my veiled antagonism, and I could see that it made him uncomfortable. As to that I did not care a button, but I had wanted to hear about Betty, and now her name was barely mentioned. I reflected that people were probably wondering over her protracted visit in the North, but no one had ventured to broach the subject to me, and I would have suffered it least of all from him. So the months went on.

Actually it was now Christmas time, and I was still a grass widower. Betty and Little Hugh had come down to the Davidsons at Irvington, and it was evident that she was thoroughly fixed in her resolve not to return to the "Hundred" until I was ready to adopt a more "reasonable" attitude. You note that I quote the adjective; at the time I was stubbornly convinced that I was right in my contention and was not inclined to alter my determination by one jot or tittle.

Pride and anger are delicious morsels under the tongue so long as they come fresh and hot from the griddle. But how tasteless and unappetizing when served cold; how devoid of vital sustenance in the making up of the bill-of-fare day after day, week, after week, month after month! Yet I chewed savagely upon the tough, stringy gristle of my wrath, and refused to admit that I was starving for one touch of Betty's hand, one faintest inflection of her beloved voice. But I could stick it if she could and I did, letting myself go only in the despatching of an extravagant Christmas box; the one item of Betty's sables made Carolina perfectos an unthinkable luxury for months. And all I got in return was a pleasant note of thanks, little Hugh's photograph, and a handsome set of English-made razors. I wondered grimly if Betty expected me to cut my throat, and was not averse to supplying the means for the operation.

Incredible as it seems to me now, Betty's absence continued through the winter and spring. In May she wrote me that she was again going to Stockbridge for the summer. Little Hugh's health could not be the excuse this time, for he had thriven famously during the winter, and was as fine a boy as any father could wish to see. I reflected dourly that I would have to take Betty's word for this assertion, there being no opportunity for using my own eyes in the appraisement. However, Betty did not trouble about explanations or apologies; she took it calmly for granted that the situation was to be continued indefinitely; she even had the exquisite effrontery to refer to the terms of my promise about entering the ill-omened library of "Hildebrand Hundred"; she intimated plainly that I was to be held to the exact letter and bond of that ridiculous agreement. What irony, seeing that she seemed bent upon breaking every other tie that united us! Of course I ignored the subject entirely in my reply (I wonder if I have made it plain that I wrote and received a letter every single day), and I comforted myself with the reflection that my silence might make her a bit uneasy. It did, but I persisted in my standoffish attitude on that particular point of contention. What indeed did that matter when compared to the actual gulf that continued to separate us!

And now I come to the swift-moving, final act of the drama; the center of the stage is still mine up to a certain point; thereafter, as you will see, it will be Betty's turn to figure in the limelight, and take the principal speaking part.

May had come and gone; now it was June again and past the middle of the month; to be precise it was the morning of Tuesday the nineteenth.

I had been a *sub rosa* subscriber to the local Stockbridge paper, probably from the secret hope of finding an occasional paragraph about Betty and her doings,

even if it were but the bare mention of her name. The paper habitually reached me on Monday, but this was Tuesday and it had but just arrived; some delay in the mails, I dare say. Upon unfolding it I turned at once to the column of personalities, and saw that among the recent arrivals at the Red Lion Inn was the name of Mr. Chalmers Warriner, of Calverton, Maryland.

Have you ever suffered the unutterable pangs of jealousy, you who read these words? If so there is no need for me to picture them; if not, there is no possible medium through which I could make them even dimly comprehensible. But that day I died a thousand deaths.

Manifestly Warriner had come to Stockbridge for a purpose, and it was unthinkable that he should have done so without a direct invitation from my wife. So Betty had made up her mind; she had taken an irrevocable step, and the die had been finally cast. What was I to do? Twice I ordered out the motor, intent upon taking the first train to the North, and as often I sent it back. I had just sense enough left to realize that I must wait for something more definite; that much I owed to the woman who was the mother of my child; perhaps the post would bring me a letter of enlightenment.

But when the ten o'clock delivery came over from Calverton I found myself as completely in the dark as ever. Betty's letter was full of Hilda Powers, who had arrived on Saturday for a stay of ten days. What did I care about Hilda Powers! And then in a postcript: "Chalmers Warriner is registered at the Red Lion, and I suppose that we shall see him by this afternoon at the latest." Now all the authorities agree that the significant part of a woman's letter is the postscript.

Fortunately, a matter of pressing importance had been brought to my attention. Zack reported that he had noticed, from the terrace, an inward bulge of one of the stained glass windows of the library. He thought that the leading might have become weakened, and if so, an immediate repair would be necessary. To determine the question he proposed that we should make an examination from the inside of the room.

I give you my word of honor that, for the time being, my promise to Betty had gone clean out of my head. All I could think of was that something of the dignity and beauty of the house—my house—was in jeopardy; and I, the Master of the "Hundred," must look to it ere irremediable damage were done. I got the key from my writing desk and, together with Zack, hurried along the corridor, unlocked the door, and entered the well-remembered room.

The apartment had the dreary aspect of long untenancy. The books, most of the furniture, and even the tapestries had been removed, and the air was dead and musty; there were cobwebs in the corners, and the dust lay thick on the oaken floor. But this was no time for sentimentalities, and I incontinently dismissed the crowded recollections that flooded my mind. "Where is it?" I demanded impatiently.

Zack pointed to the third (running from left to right) of the long windows that flanked the great fireplace. If you recall my earlier description of the library, the window in question represented the flight of the Israelitish spies from the land of Canaan, bearing with them the gigantic cluster of grapes.

"Dere it am," answered Zack, pointing to the upper part of the painted scene, the depiction of an arbor from which depended bunches of the glorious fruit as yet unplucked.

True enough, there was a significant inward bend at this particular place, and it was evident that the leading of the tracery had partially given way. It was imperative to make repairs at once, and, fortunately, there was a stained glass manufactory in Calverton, and skilled workmen could be obtained there on short notice. I telephoned my request, and, an hour later, a couple of men were on hand to do the work.

Apparently the weakness was comparatively trifling, and it was only necessary to remove a small portion of the upper half of the window. The men were experienced and intelligent; they knew their job, and after the temporary scaffolding had been erected they took out the injured sections, carefully numbering the separate pieces of glass so as to ensure their correct replacement. Among the smaller bits were a dozen or more bullseyes of purple glass simulating a cluster of grapes. They seemed to be all of the same size, each enclosed in a diminutive leaden ring.

"How about it, Jem?" asked the assistant workman. "They be alike as peas in a pod."

"No call to number 'em," decided Jem promptly. "It's all the same in the picter, so don't bother about marking the bullseyes."

I, listening to the colloquy, commended Jem's dictum as being eminently sensible, particularly in view of the fact that the weather was threatening and time was of value in getting the window in proper shape to resist a blow. The

purple bullseyes were tumbled into a basket, and the work went on.

It was rapid and clever craftsmanship, for by six o'clock the damage had been repaired and the glass had been replaced; to my way of thinking, as strong as ever. I said as much, but Jem, to my surprise, shook his head. "All that tracery work ought to be gone over," he said, "to make the job a good one. You can see for yourself," he went on, "that a lot of the main leading is none too solid—look here; and there!" and he pointed out several places where indeed the glass seemed very insecure in its setting.

"I don't want to run any risk," I said, "How about coming back to-morrow to make a thorough job of it?"

"Sorry, Mr. Hildebrand, but me and my mate are due at Baltimore in the morning, setting a chancel window at S. Paul's. I don't think your work can be managed before the first of next week."

"Then I'll have to take the risk?"

"I'm afraid so. But we've put the really bad place in decent order, and I don't see why the glass shouldn't stand any ordinary wind. Just got to chance it, sir."

Of course there was nothing further to say, so I thanked the men and dismissed them. Yes, there was no alternative; I should have to chance it.

When I wrote my usual nightly letter to Betty I told her of the circumstances which had caused me to break the letter of my promise about entering the library. I dare say I nourished a secret hope that the news would upset her; that it might even have the effect of inducing her to make a hasty return to the "Hundred." But that would imply that she still cared for me, and the cold fact remained that, at this very moment, the name of Chalmers Warriner stood inscribed upon the register of the Red Lion Inn at Stockbridge.

Chapter XIX

The Seat Perilous

Wednesday, the twentieth of June, was the blackest of all black days. When Betty's letter came I found it very unsatisfactory reading. Warriner had been making the most of his opportunities; that was certain. He had been over twice for five-o'clock-tea, and a number of pleasant affairs were in prospect—a water party on the Bowl, a day's golf at Pittsfield, a masked ball at Lenox; so it went. Apparently Betty was in for a royal good time, and she had no compunction in making me aware of the fact. My intrusion upon the forbidden ground of the library was, it seemed, a matter of no importance; not even mentioned. Later on, I realized that she could not have received my communication on the subject—but never mind; I felt aggrieved, and the black dog of jealousy heeled me wherever I went that long, beautiful June day. Surely, I was the most miserable man alive, and it is not surprising that I diligently continued the digging of the pit into which I was so soon to fall.

Thursday, the twenty-first, brought a number of business matters to my attention, and under the pressure of these imperative duties I half forgot about my troubles. Again Betty's letter was non-committal and made no references to my doings or delinquencies. I should have enjoyed calling it evasive, but that was hardly possible seeing that Warriner's name was mentioned three or four times; the fellow was assuredly making hay. After my solitary evening dinner I thought it wise to keep my mind at work, and, accordingly, I started in on a big batch of farm accounts.

I had heard the trampling of a horse's hoofs on the gravel drive, but had paid no attention; now a heavy step echoed along the black-and-white chequers of the great hall, and I became conscious that Marcus, the house-boy, stood at the door in the act of announcing a visitor. I looked up and saw John Thaneford.

Amazement held me speechless for a moment; then I found my feet and blurted out some form of greeting; I can't be sure that we actually shook hands, but this was my house and he had come as a guest; I must observe the decencies.

"Black Jack" had changed but little in the two years since I had seen him.

Perhaps a trifle broader in girth, while the cleft between his sable eyebrows was deeper than ever. Apparently, he was quite at his ease, and I fancied that he took a furtive and malicious pleasure in my embarrassment. Now we were seated; I pushed the box of cigars to his hand, and waited, tongued-tied and flushing, for the conversational ice to be broken.

"So we meet again, Cousin Hugh!" he began, with perfect aplomb. "You don't appear to be overjoyed."

"Why should I be?" I retorted. "But I don't forget that you are under my roof. Naturally, I am somewhat surprised."

"At my return, or because I am seeking you out at the 'Hundred?' Possibly, you have forgotten that I no longer possess even the apology of a shelter that was once 'Thane Court.'"

"You can hardly hold me responsible for the fire," I said, feeling somewhat nettled at his tone.

"Oh, surely not," he assented, flicking the ash from his cigar with an airy wave of his hand—that well remembered, big hand with its black-tufted knuckles.

"As for the property, I bought it in at public sale to protect myself. You can have it back at any time for the price I paid. And no interest charges."

"Very good of you, Cousin Hugh, and later on I may hold you to your offer. I may say that I am in quite the position to do so," he added with a boastful flourish.

"Glad to hear it," I said shortly. And in my heart of hearts I did rejoice, for I had an acute realization of what this man's heritage in life might have been had Francis Graeme and I never met. Somehow the whole atmosphere of our foregathering had suddenly lightened, and I experienced a feeling of hospitality toward Thaneford which was certainly cordial and almost friendly. "By the way, have you dined?" I asked. "The cook has gone home, but I dare say Effingham could find some cold meat and a salad."

"I had supper at the hotel in Calverton, but a drop or two of whiskey wouldn't go amiss. The prohibition lid is clamped down pretty tight around here."

I rang for Effingham. "Bring a bottle of 'King William,'" I ordered. "Or perhaps you would prefer rye or bourbon?"

"Scotch suits me right enough," he answered carelessly. He rose and began pacing the room. "I heard something in Calverton about your closing up the library," he said abruptly.

"It was Mrs. Hildebrand's wish. You can understand that Miss Trevor's death was a great shock to her."

Not a muscle in his face moved, but he stopped short in his tracks. "Eunice dead!" he ejaculated. "When and where?"

"In June two years ago. She was found dead, sitting in the library."

John Thaneford drew a long breath. "I wondered that her letters ceased so suddenly," he said coolly. "But Eunice was always doing something out of the common, and I laid it to some queer slant in her mind. You never can tell what a woman will do or won't do."

The callous selfishness of the man was still rampant, and it disgusted me. Doubtless, he had no idea that I was well aware of the relations that had existed between him and the unfortunate girl. And then, to my astonishment, a new note of softness, of regret even, stole into his voice. "Do you mind opening up the room?" he asked. "So much for remembrance," he added in an undertone that I barely caught.

This time my promise to Betty did occur to my mind, but already the covenant had been broken, and further infraction could not greatly signify.

We walked down the corridor, and I unlocked the door and pushed it open, calling to the house-boy to bring in a lamp.

"So you've cleaned everything out," remarked Thaneford, as he glanced around. "That is, about everything but the big teak desk, the leather screen, and the swivel-chair."

"The desk was too cumbersome for use in the other room," I answered. "As for the chair you see it is riveted down into the floor—not even screwed in the ordinary way. I fancy it would be a job to get it free."

"And no object either. Poor Eunice, you say, died here?"

"Sitting in that very chair."

"Like Francis Graeme before her," mused Thaneford.

"Yes, and before him four other men, all masters of 'Hildebrand Hundred'—Yardley, and Randall, and Horace, and Richard. But perhaps you know these things even better than I do."

"Evidently a seat perilous," he said sardonically. "No wonder you do not choose to occupy it."

I don't know what mad, foolish impulse moved me to go and sit down in the big, swivel-chair, but there I presently found myself, my face reddening a trifle under the quizzical stare of John Thaneford's dull, black eyes. Effingham entered with the whiskey and glasses, and I bade him put the tray on the desk and fetch a chair for Mr. Thaneford.

"Good medicine!" approved my guest as he tossed off his glass. There was a plate of biscuit at his elbow; he took one of the little round crackers and bit into it; then, with a smothered ejaculation, he spewed forth the half masticated fragments. I looked my natural surprise.

"I never could abide those damned saltines," he explained, with a touch of his old glowering sulkiness. "I'll drink with you, Cousin Hugh, till the swallows homeward fly, but I'll not taste your salt; I reserve the right to withdraw the flag of truce without notice."

Well, I should have had warning a-plenty by this time, but it was all to no purpose; I had the full realization that I was treading a dangerous path, and yet it was not in my conscious power to take one single step toward safety. Call it fatalism if you will, or the pure recklessness engendered by the growing conviction that Betty was lost to me for good and all; whatever the secret springs of my present course of action, the outcome inevitably must have been the same; a Scotchman would have said that I was fey. And perhaps I was.

I never had been what you call a drinking man, but to-night I was matching glass for glass with "Black Jack" Thaneford, who could put any man, yes any three men in King William County, under the table. The night came on apace, and twice Effingham had been ordered to bring in another supply of spirits. Suddenly John Thaneford broke away from the trivial subjects which we had been discussing.

"Some two years ago, Cousin Hugh," he began, "I gave you a choice—Betty Graeme or the 'Hundred.' Do you remember?"

"I remember," I answered steadily.

"But you would not make it; you took them both."

"What right had you to force such an issue?" I demanded hotly.

"That is beside the point. I did force it."

"Well?"

"I'll give you the final opportunity."

"Possibly, you have forgotten that Betty is now my wife?"

"I have not forgotten it."

"And as for the 'Hundred'——"

"The 'Hundred,'" he repeated, a dull, red flush dyeing his high forehead.

"There is another interest now besides my own that I am bound to protect; I have a son."

"Ah, I had not heard. Of course that does make a difference."

"All the difference. See here, Thaneford," I went on impulsively, "I don't want to play an ungenerous part, and I can see something of your side of the case. I am prepared to make some provision, indeed an ample one; but the 'Hundred' must remain where it is."

"And that is your last word?" he queried almost indifferently.

"My last word," I answered, looking him straight in the eye.

"Then we know where we are," he responded. "The bottle stands with you, Cousin Hugh."

We renewed our potations, but thenceforth in silence; for the space of an hour and more not another word passed between us.

And the silence was an hostile one, the quiet of watchful and eternal enmity. I know that I hated John Thaneford and that he hated me; moreover, this condition could never change or alter until the end of time itself. Well, anything was better than the false cordiality of conventional speech; at least we knew where we stood. And still our grim wassail went on.

I can't recall falling to sleep in the great chair, but now, with a sudden, painful start, I awoke to realize that it was broad daylight—Friday, the twenty-second of June. My head was aching frightfully, and my arms and legs seemed singularly cramped and constricted. Then I came face to face with the ugly fact that I was bound fast in my chair by stout cords that secured my shoulders, wrists, and ankles; I could move my head a trifle to one side or the other and that was all.

John Thaneford sat opposite me, smoking a cigarette and looking as though he had remained entirely unaffected by the amount of liquor he had consumed. Seeing that I was awake he rose, came over to where I sat, and examined carefully the various ligatures that constrained my movements. Not a word was uttered on either side, and indeed there was no need for any speech between us. Doubtless I should be informed in due time of whatever fate might be in store for me; and, for the present, I could only wait with what show of patience it were possible to muster.

A discreet knock sounded on the closed door leading to the corridor. Thaneford snapped back the locking-bolt and stepped across the threshold; I realized that Effingham was standing there, but the leather screen prevented my seeing him, and of course it hid, in turn, my mortifying predicament. Now I might have called out, shouted for help, raised the very roof in indignant protest at the humiliation to which I had been subjected. And yet I did none of these obvious things, and I think John Thaneford was shrewd enough to know that my tongue would be held out of very shame; otherwise, he would have taken the precaution to slip a gag into my mouth.

I heard Thaneford tell Effingham, speaking of course in my name, to bring a large pot of black coffee and a plate of crackers. "The unsalted kind," he added, as though actuated by an afterthought whose significance became instantly clear to my own mind. "Or better yet," he continued, "some of those big, round biscuits that they call 'pilot bread.' No, Mr. Hildebrand doesn't care for any tea this morning—what's that! a telegram? Then why the devil didn't you say so! Give it here, and mind you hurry up that coffee—hot and black, and strong as sheol."

The door swung to, and I could hear Effingham's carpet slippers padding softly away. Too late now, I regretted that I had not given the alarm. Even if Thaneford had used violent means to silence Effingham my voice would have rung all

through the lower part of the house, prompting some sort of inquiry and a probable rescue. But that chance was gone.

Thaneford returned to my immediate vicinity, the buff telegram envelope in his hand. I could see that it was addressed to me, but he broke the seal without even the pretense of hesitation, and glanced over the message. His lips curled into a genial sneer (if one can imagine such a combination); then he deliberately held up the sheet for me to read.

If indeed you still care for me, don't enter library again under any consideration or for any purpose. Coming.

The message was signed with my dear girl's initials, and it was plain that it had been written under stress of emotion. In spite of my equivocal position (for really I could not bring myself to believe that John Thaneford intended actual personal violence), and the extreme discomfort of being trussed up like a hog going to the slaughter pen, I was conscious that, after all these months of alienation, some mysterious barrier had fallen and the long misunderstanding was in a fair way of being cleared up. And so, although my temples were thumping like a steam engine and the pain in my arms and legs was deadening to a terrifying numbness, my spirits rebounded to an extravagant height; my heart sang again.

"If you still care for me!" And then that wonderful word: "Coming." I was wildly, deliriously happy, for now everything must come right. What a fool I had been through all these doleful months! how wholeheartedly would I make my confession; how tender and generous would be my absolution—but a sudden realization of things as they really were checked, like a cold douche, my satisfying glow of well-being. If danger actually existed for me within the library walls I was ill prepared to meet it, sitting fast bound in my chair with "Black Jack" Thaneford opposite me, an evil smile upon his lips and the glint of a spark in the dead blackness of his half-closed eyes.

And then, of a sudden, I became horribly afraid. Not of John Thaneford, for all that he hated me and had me in his power, but of the Terror, unknown, unseen, and unheard, that lurked within the circle of these walls; whose coming none could foresee and none prevent; for whose appearance the ultimate stage had been set and the final watch posted.

Remember, I had nothing tangible upon which to base even a fragment of theory, and all of our original clues had proved worthless. Here were neither dim,

midnight spaces, nor hollow walls, nor underlying abysses. Just a big, almost empty room, devoid of alcoves and odd corners, and withal flooded with the sunshine of a perfect June day. The only feature out of the common was the secret outlet behind the chimney-breast, and some time ago I had replaced the original lock by one of the latest, burglar proof pattern. There were only two keys, one on my own bunch and the other in Betty's possession; certainly the peril was not likely to appear in that quarter; that would have been too obvious, even amateurish.

The morning dragged on. When Marcus knocked at the door, seeking admission to carry in the breakfast tray, he was roughly ordered to set it down on the threshold and take himself off. Thaneford, waiting until the house-boy was well out of hearing, unlocked the door and carried in the tray for himself; evidently, he did not intend to give me a second opportunity to send out any S. O. S. calls. With the massive door once more *in situ* I might halloo and shout until I burst my bellows, without anyone being the wiser.

Thaneford, in quick succession, drank two big cups of the coffee. He did not go through the form of offering me a taste of the beverage, and much as I longed for its comforting ministrations, I was hardly ready to ask the boon of my jailor. Effingham must have been unable to find any of the unsalted pilot bread, for he had provided, in its stead, several rounds of buttered toast and a dish of scrambled eggs. But Thaneford would have none of these forbidden viands. Strange! that he should balk upon the purely academic question of a few grains of salt. But we all enjoy our pet inconsistencies. So he finished the pot of coffee and fell to smoking again, while I continued to speculate, a little grimly, upon the chances of ever getting clear of this infernal coil. Apparently, there was nothing for either of us to do but to go on waiting, waiting.

The hours dragged along and now it was hard upon high noon, as I could see by Thaneford's gold repeater that lay on the desk between us; with an indescribable thrill I realized that he, too, was watching the minute hand as it slowly traveled upward to the sign of the Roman numerals, XII. Unquestionably, some fateful moment was approaching, and yet there was nothing in the physical surroundings to give rise to uneasiness even, let alone apprehension; nothing unless it were the occasional rumble of distant thunder, a sullen drone underneath the pleasant song of the birds and the cheerful humming of bees among the rose bushes.

Through the painted window, depicting the flight of the Hebrew spies, the

sunshine poured in full volume, the white light transformed to gorgeous color by the medium through which it passed. One broad bar lay close at hand upon the oaken floor, a riotous splash of red from Rahab's scarlet cord intermingled with purple blotches from the circular bosses that simulated the huge grapes of the Promised Land: I watched the variegated band of color as it crept slowly toward my chair; at present, it lay to the right, but as the sun approached the zenith it swung around, little by little, so as to finally bring my person into the sphere of its influence; now a piercing purple beam struck me directly in the face and I blinked; an instant later and the dazzle had passed beyond; again I saw clearly.

Thaneford had risen, his teeth clenched upon his lower lip, a half cry choking in his throat. Together our eyes fastened on the dial of his watch, where the hands now pointed to eight minutes after twelve o'clock. With one convulsive movement he snatched up the time-piece, and dashed it in golden ruin to the floor; then he sprang toward me, and I knew in another moment those strong hands, with their black-tufted knuckles, would be gripping at my throat.

But that moment never came. On he leaped, lunging straight through the colored stream of sunlight. And then a purple flash seemed to strike fair on his black-shocked head; he reeled and fell. Down at my feet he rolled, his limbs twitching in the death throe; simultaneously came a tremendous crash of thunder, echoing and re-echoing from the straining and cracking walls, while the blazing band of gold and purple and scarlet went out like the flame of a wind-blown candle. I looked up to see Betty's pale face framed in the archway of the secret passage behind the chimney-breast; back of her stood Chalmers Warriner.

Betty had an automatic pistol in her hand, and she kept it trained on the motionless, sprawling figure at my feet. She must have realized that the precaution was unnecessary, but it was all part of the preconceived plan, and she could not have borne to have stood idly by.

Warriner now entered the room, but he did not come directly toward me; on the contrary, he kept close to the wall until he had arrived at a point diagonally behind my chair; then he made his dash, and I could feel my bonds falling apart under the keen edge of the hunting knife that he carried. "Can you walk?" he asked. "Wait and I'll help you."

He dragged me to my feet, and I stumbled back to the wall, holding onto his arm; now the room was in almost complete darkness save for the recurrent flashes of steel-blue radiance from the incessant electrical discharges; the rolling

thunder drowned out any further exchange of speech.

Together we crept toward the secret entrance, still hugging the line and angles of the wall. Betty's arms drew me into the sheltering warmth of her breast; now the floor rocked beneath our feet as the lightning bolt sheared through the doomed roof, and the great painted window of the Israelitish spies, bending inward under the pressure of the on-rushing wind, crashed into multitudinous, iridescent ruin, obliterating in its fall the white, twisted face of the man who had been John Thaneford.

At last we were in the open, shaken and trembling, drenched to the skin by the descending floods, but safe; we pulled up short and looked back.

The library wing was in flames which seemed to blaze the more fiercely under the lash of the down-slanting rain. But it might still be possible to save the main house, and I ran to the fire alarm, the familiar rustic apparatus of a great, iron ring suspended from a stout framework; and made it give furious tongue, swinging the heavy hammer until my arms seemed ready to pull away from their sockets. But help was at hand, Zack and Zeb at the head of a body of field hands; and with them the old-fashioned hand-pumping fire engine which had been preparing itself for just such an emergency through a full century of watchful waiting.

Our domestic fire brigade had been well drilled, and the immediate danger was soon past; finally we succeeded in getting the blaze in the library wing under control. The interior had been entirely gutted, and the roof had fallen in. But the walls remained standing, and, apparently, they had suffered but little damage.

The storm was over and once again the sun was shining. Innumerable brilliants flashed on the smooth emerald of the lawns, the leaves of the lindens were rustling softly, and a Baltimore oriole, gorgeous in his orange and black livery, returned scornful challenge to a blue jay's chattering abuse. I might have deemed it but the awakening from a horrid nightmare, were it not for the incredible fact that Betty's hand lay close in mine and Chalmers Warriner was asking me for a cigarette.

Whereupon I distinguished myself by crumpling down at Betty's feet; somebody drew the cap of darkness over my eyes.

Chapter XX

The Blind Terror

For three days I wandered in a phantasmagoric wilderness, my principal obsession making me identify myself with that pair of Hebrew spies staggering under the weight of those enormous grapes; would we never lose sight of Rahab's scarlet cord, and be again in safety and quiet! Then the confusion in my head cleared away, and I saw that it was really Betty who sat by my bed and not "Black Jack" Thaneford.

Yes, John Thaneford lies quiet and still in S. Saviour's churchyard—with his forefathers and mine—and enmity should end at the edge of the grave. God knows that each one of us needs forgiveness, both human and divine, for the deeds done in the flesh.

This morning I am allowed to sit up. Betty is busy at her household accounts, and Little Hugh is playing on the floor with blocks and tin soldiers. What a tremendous big chap he is! Perhaps a trifle shy of me at present, but time will soon put that to rights.

A beautiful day, and I am feeling almost if not quite myself. To-morrow I am to get up, and Chalmers Warriner is coming to dinner.

It is a long and well nigh incredible story to which I have been listening this

evening. But it explains everything and clears up everything, and the shadow that has hung over "Hildebrand Hundred" for so long has finally fled away; never, thank God! to return.

Imprimis, let me register full and frank confession of my unutterable folly in ever doubting Betty; or, for that matter, my dear friend Chalmers Warriner. And the explanation was so absurdly simple—the secret engagement between Warriner and Hilda Powers. Of course, Betty had been Hilda's confidante and could not betray her even to re-establish a foolish husband's peace of mind. The ridiculous side of the affair lay in the fact that there had been no particular reason for keeping the engagement under cover, outside of Hilda's whim to have the announcement delayed until after the marriage of her elder sister Eva. Anyhow it *had* been a secret and Betty had kept it loyally, even to her own hurt. Moreover, she may have detected other traces of the green-eyed monster in my make-up, and had decided that I needed a salutary lesson. Let it go at that.

Of course, the mere statement of fact was enough to untangle the whole coil; explained at once was the confidential understanding which certainly had existed between my wife and my friend; also Warriner's appearance at Stockbridge (where Hilda was already Betty's guest), and all the other straws that seemed to show which way the wind blew, and yet were nothing but straws, hopelessly light-minded and wholly irresponsible. I made my amends humbly enough, and they were generously accepted; we will say no more about it.

Dinner was over, and we were taking our coffee on the front portico. It was a perfect June night, the heavens a sable pall studded with innumerable star-clusters, the little vagrant breezes redolent of new mown hay, a nightingale singing in a nearby boscage. An atmosphere of heavenly peace and quiet that I must needs disturb with the blunt question:

"And now what was it that killed John Thaneford?"

Chalmers Warriner threw away the butt of his cigar. "What was it that killed all the Hildebrands throughout two generations?" he retorted. "Yardley and Randall and Horace and Richard, and Francis Graeme? The answer to the one question is the answer to them all. And, finally, there was Eunice Trevor, who went voluntarily to meet the invisible angel of death—a brave woman if there ever

was one! Of course you remember the unfinished letter which she left behind her. There was a particular paragraph in it that impressed me, and I copied it down in my note-book." He pulled out the little volume and began to read:

... moreover, I believe that the heart of the Terror beats in this very place—the library of "Hildebrand Hundred." Something is in this room, something eternally menacing and eternally patient. It may be in one year or it may be in three and fifty years, but in the end it will surely claim its own. Yes, something is here, the something for which I myself am waiting; but, search as you will, you shall not find the Terror; you must await its coming. At least you may be certain that it will not fail to keep tryst.

"It must be evident," continued Chalmers, "that Eunice Trevor was aware of the very real danger attendant upon the occupation of the room we call the library at 'Hildebrand Hundred.' But she did not know what was the nature of that danger; in the same breath she speaks of the peril as being eternally menacing and eternally patient—a contradiction in terms. How could the Terror be always ready to strike, and yet, in one case at least, wait half a century for the opportunity? This discrepancy bothered me from the very first; but let me explain myself more exactly; I made some other notes at the time."

Warriner ruffled the leaves of his note-book, and began again:

"Eunice Trevor gives a list of the owners of the 'Hundred,' together with the dates of their succession and death, running back to 1860, when Yardley Hildebrand succeeded his father, Oliver; Yardley himself dying a year later under mysterious circumstances. At least I assume that they were mysterious, for Effingham has assured me that he died alone and while engaged in looking over some papers in the then newly completed library. The list continues with Randall and Horace and Richard Hildebrand, and ends with Francis Graeme. Now for Miss Trevor's comments:

"As we analyze these dates and periods we come upon some curious coincidences, and also upon some marked discrepancies. Yardley Hildebrand reigned for one brief year, and the same is true of Randall Hildebrand and of Francis Graeme. But Horace Hildebrand enjoyed three full years of sovereignty, while Richard was Hildebrand of the "Hundred" for no less a period than fifty-three years. Yet all five went to their death along an unfrequented road, and no man can say of a certainty what was the essential damnation of their taking-off. They died, and they died alone—here in this very room where I sit waiting,

waiting."

Warriner lit a fresh cigar.

"Making due allowance for feminine hyperbole," he said judicially, "and for the writer's excited state of mind, we arrive at certain definite facts. Here are six deaths—seven if we include that of John Thaneford—and all of them happening under apparently natural but really abnormal conditions. The constant factors in the series of equations are the *locale* and the general circumstances—an unattended death and no visible cause for dissolution. The period is a variable quantity—from one to over fifty years. We therefore may conclude justifiably that Miss Trevor was wrong in her assertion about something deadly and menacing being always in the room, ready to spring upon its prey. Under that hypothesis the apartment would quickly have become impossible for human occupancy. The alternative theory is that, granting certain conditions, the lethal agent might enter the room and accomplish its deadly purpose, and then immediately withdraw. Finally, this agency might be human or purely mechanical in character. You see what I'm driving at. From the first, I believed that the attack was delivered from without, while Betty and Eunice held that it was what the police call an inside job."

"And neither theory was wholly right nor wholly wrong," observed Betty.

"Perfectly," rejoined Warriner. "As usual, the truth lay in the middle distance. Now you go on, Betty; this is your part of the story."

"My part of the story!" echoed Betty deprecatingly. "I'm not an author; I'm merely the amanuensis, the typist, if you please."

"Mock modesty," proclaimed Warriner. "Even now we would still be standing before a closed door were it not for Betty and her master-key."

"Yes, my master-key," scoffed Betty. "Only it doesn't seem very clever of me to have carried it all these months without ever thinking to use it."

"Perhaps you couldn't find your pocket," suggested Chalmers.

"Enough of this bush-beating and persiflage," I commanded severely. "Will you go on and tell me, Betty?"

"Well," began my wife obediently, "we had been warned away from the 'Hundred,' but you were obstinate and wouldn't budge; you had to be saved in

spite of yourself.

"Of course I was right in going North immediately after the Midsummer Night's ball at 'Powersthorp.' Little Hugh really needed the change, and I wanted to be able to call at will on Chalmers for assistance in working out my problem. I couldn't do so if I stayed on at the 'Hundred,' even by means of correspondence. I don't suppose, Hugh, that I need to particularize any further in this direction?"

I mumbled something unintelligible, and, to add to my discomfiture, Warriner actually laughed. Never mind; I deserved it all.

"I could feel reasonably easy in my mind," went on Betty, "since I knew that the library had been dismantled and locked up. Besides, I had your solemn promise that you would not attempt to enter it for any purpose."

"I forgot," I murmured.

"That sounds like honest penitence, and I can forgive you—now. But I shall never be able to forget the afternoon your letter came with its calm announcement that you had been in the room to see about the damaged window; yes, and would probably have to go again.

"That letter reached Stockbridge at ten o'clock in the morning of Thursday, the twenty-first. Fifteen minutes later an express train left for New York, and Chalmers and I were the passengers on it, leaving Hilda to follow with the nurse and the baby. At the first opportunity I sent you a telegram. Did you receive it?"

My thoughts went back to the yellow telegraphic sheet clutched in John Thaneford's black-knuckled hands, and held up before my helpless eyes. "Yes, it came," I answered slowly, "but too late to be of any use."

"I was afraid of that," said Betty, "but we were leaving no stone unturned. We were missing connections all the way down, and I knew that the trap was ready for springing. And someone else knew it, too—John Thaneford."

"But," I objected, "Eunice expressly says that John Thaneford did not know the secret; except perhaps in part."

"What did he mean then by stupefying you with whiskey, and placing you, bound and helpless, in the big swivel-chair?" put in Warriner.

I was silent.

"Finally," continued Warriner, "it seemed certain that something had gone wrong with the working of the machinery, whatever it was. Whereupon he started for you—you remember—with bare hands."

Ah, yes, I remembered.

"Unquestionably, Thaneford was carrying out a perfectly definite plan of procedure. He knew what ought to have happened."

"But it didn't happen," I protested. "I'm here and very much alive."

"It did, and it didn't," retorted Warriner. "John Thaneford is dead."

"You mean—you mean——" I boggled.

"Yes, the Terror had entered the room; don't you recall how close I kept to the wall when I was trying to reach you? But it had become a blind Terror, and John Thaneford got in its way."

"But how and why?" I asked helplessly.

"Betty, it's your turn again," said Warriner, settling back in his chair.

Chapter XXI

A Lost Clue

"Suppose we admit, for the sake of argument," began Betty "that John Thaneford was in possession of the secret. Then everything points back to his father, old Fielding, who certainly had all the brains of the family. Last and most important, it was a secret which Mr. Thaneford, senior, desired to impart to me; he did tell me all he could."

"The series of numbers, you mean? I recall them perfectly: 1-4-2-4-8. And what then?"

"Do you remember the story of Christian and his fellow pilgrim, Hopeful, imprisoned in Giant Despair's stronghold of Doubting Castle? After languishing for a week or more in darkness and misery, Hopeful suddenly bethinks him of a key which he has in his bosom, a key that will unlock any door in the castle. The rest is easy.

"So, too, I had my key, but I had only used it once—to unlock the first and most obvious door——"

"The combination of the safe," I interrupted.

"Precisely. It never occurred to either of us that it might be a master-key to which all locks must yield. But so it was.

"Not that I learned to use it without a lot of trouble and discouragement. It took months and months, and I only got it fully working on the train trip down from Stockbridge.

"Of course, you have guessed that the whole story lay buried in that leather-bound book belonging to Fielding Thaneford which we found in the safe. I remembered all that you had told me about 'Le Chiffre Indéchiffrable,' but even granting that that particular cypher had been employed, how was I ever to stumble upon the indispensable key-word, or more likely, key-sentence?

"One day I had an inspiration. There was the series of numbers: 1-4-2-4-8. Considered as numbers merely they could be of no use, since most cypher codes

are built up on letters. But I might put the numbers into their written word equivalents, thus: One-four-two-four-eight It was certainly conceivable that these letters might form the key-sentence; it would be all the more easily memorized since, in its numerical form, it served as a combination to the safe.

"I had with me the magic square which you had made for me, and I began very carefully to work out the problem according to your directions.

"The initial procedure was to put down my theoretical key-sentences, thus:"

O N E F O U R T W O F O U R E I G H T

"Underneath I must write the cypher message, and half a dozen letters would be enough to show if I were on the right track. I opened Mr. Fielding Thaneford's old book, and copied down the first seven letters, ranging them vertically under the key-letters. That gave me this arrangement:"

O N E F O U R
Q W O T T U I

"Now the rule goes on to say that you must find the letter O in the top horizontal column, and follow that column vertically downward until you come to the first cypher letter, in this case Q. The letter at the outside, left end of this second horizontal column, will be the first letter of the original message.

"Well, I tried it, and got the letter B. The next pair yielded an I, which was encouraging, as one would expect a vowel in this position. But the third try gave me a J, and that was not so promising; then I got an N and an E. So far my decoded message read: BIJNE; not very enlightening. The next pair showed the letter U in both key-sentence and cypher. Such a combination is impossible on our magic square, and I had to put down a blank space. The final letter obtained was a Q, and the complete result read: BIJNE-Q. Pure gibberish of course. I tried out a few more pairs, and then gave up in disgust; my beautiful theory had fallen to pieces.

"Just the same, I wasn't ready to give it up. I knew, right in my bones, that old Mr. Thaneford had wanted to tell me something of supreme importance at that last moment on his deathbed, when my hand lay in his and I could feel the intermittent pressure of his fingers. It was impossible that I should be mistaken about any of the figures, for he went over the series three or four times; besides, they did open the safe.

"I was still sure that the numbers meant something more than the mere combination to an old strong-box that held nothing of any pecuniary value. The real secret lay between the covers of that leather-bound book, and I was certain that the old man had been desirous that I should discover it. The Thanefords and the Hildebrands had not been friends for a long while, although nobody knew just why. Probably, it was some ancient grudge Or unforgiven wrong, and old Mr. Thaneford had done his part in keeping it up. But now that he was sick and paralyzed and dying, and especially since he and I had become friends of a sort, he was willing to bury the hatchet. So he told all he could—you remember that he couldn't speak—and he seemed to feel satisfied that I would find the hint sufficient, that I would be clever enough to solve the puzzle.

"And surely it was a puzzle. My best guess had come a flivver, and I didn't see how I could go a step further. Perhaps it was silly to attach so much importance to what the old man had tried to tell me, but I had an intuition that our future happiness and safety were bound up in those crumbling leather covers.

"Time went on, and the solution was as far off as ever; at least apparently. Little Hugh and I had come to Irvington for the winter; it was close to Christmas, and I had the blues terribly. Just to think of Christmas and that abyss lying between us! For I knew that you would not come unless I called, and I could not send for you quite yet. Suppose that the discovery of the secret should be close at hand; I might need Chalmers to help out on some difficult scientific point.

"It is always the little things that show the way out. Hilda's weekly letter had come, and I was reading it eagerly hoping to find some mention of you. Now Hilda, poor dear! is an awful speller; she never could learn to visualize words. As I read along I came on a word which looked odd; then I saw that she had committed the careless stenographer's error of spelling 'forty' with an u, thus: 'fourty.' Of course, the pronunciation is the same in either case—and then it was that I got my *big* idea. Was it possible that the phonetic sounds in my series of numbers might fit words of entirely different meaning than their ordinary equivalents in letters? Let me try.

"1-4-2-4-8. Why, yes, 1 is 'one' and also 'won'; 4 is 'four' and also 'for'; 2 is 'two' and also 'too'—quick! let me get them all down. And here was the result: Won—for—too—for—ate. You see that, in every instance, the phonetic sound of the number can be represented exactly by a word of entirely different meaning. But this peculiar quality in the series, 1-4-2-4-8, would not be apparent at a casual glance, and the figures could even be written down for future reference, or sent

to a distant correspondent, without any probability of that inner significance becoming revealed. Very clever of Fielding Thaneford—that is if my deductions were really correct!

"The first step was to set down the new key-sentence with the cypher writing underneath. Here it is; this time using fifteen letters."

W O N F O R T O O F O R A T E
Q W O T T U I J X I S V A Z P

"Applying the decoding rule I got the following in my first six tries:"

T H A N E C

"You can imagine how excited I was. If my theory were correct the next four letters should be OURT, completing the word 'Thane Court,' Eureka! it is coming! It is coming! I got both the O and the U.

"From the height of exultation to the depths of despair. For instead of R in the ninth place, I had to set down an I; and then, in succession: CDD-FKL. Perfectly impossible! Look at it: THANECOUICDD-FKL, etc.

"And yet the cypher had certainly started to uncode; what could have thrown me off the track? For I had succeeded in getting 'Thanecou,' and that unusual combination was significant in the highest degree. What word could it be but 'Thane Court,' the ancestral home of the Thanefords? Why the chances were a million to one against my reaching such a series for—for——"

"Fortuitously," I prompted.

"Yes, that's it; something like the 'fortuitous concourse of atoms' that the philosophers talk about. I remember the phrase from my school days.

"And yet the mix-up came to spoil everything. For what could any sensible person make of THANECOUICDD-FKL?

"I tried carrying on the series until my brain was positively dizzy, but I got nothing except incomprehensible rubbish. And yet I knew that I had found a real clue; how in the world had I lost it again? I used to work until I actually went fast to sleep at my desk, but nothing came of it. It was enough to drive one mad.

"The middle of May I went up to Stockbridge, and of course I carried my

troubles with me. Wherever I looked I seemed to see that tantalizing key-sentence: Won—for—too—for—ate; it was as bad as the squaring of the circle. Just some little, insignificant error was keeping me from the solving of the puzzle, but for the life of me I couldn't put my finger on it. Honestly now, Hugh, do you think you would have been clever enough to have figured it out?"

I checked up Betty's "layout" and went over the decoding process with meticulous care. I got precisely the same result: THANECOU—and then chaos.

"It beats me," I confessed. "It's enough to make one dotty."

"I dare say that is what Aunt Alice Crew thought of me in her heart of hearts," laughed Betty, "although she was too polite to say so. And, really, it was getting on my nerves. I couldn't eat, and a *nuit blanche* was no uncommon thing with me. I couldn't get it out of my head, you understand, that the solving of the problem must be of immense importance. There *was* a mystery at the 'Hundred,' and so long as it remained a mystery there could be no enduring peace or happiness for us. If you had been willing to sell the 'Hundred' there might have been some chance of escaping the curse; hadn't poor Eunice said as much in that weird statement which she left behind her. But you would not consider the suggestion even."

"I suppose I was pig-headed and altogether in the wrong," I admitted humbly. "But it all seemed so fantastic and incredible—here in the twentieth century."

"Granting that the mystery had continued unsolved," said Betty, looking me straight in the eye. "What then?"

"But you have given me to understand——" I began.

"Never mind that," interrupted my wife. "Even now you don't know the secret, and I might find it inadvisable to tell you. Admitting the possibility that the ghost has not been truly laid, would you still insist upon remaining master of 'Hildebrand Hundred'?"

A vision of those strong, cruel hands, with their black-tufted knuckles, rose before me, and I shuddered.

"Or would you be willing that Little Hugh should enter upon his inheritance with this cloud hanging over it?"

"No, I wouldn't," I said soberly. "To be honest, I hadn't thought of it in that

light."

"You see a woman has to consider all these things," rejoined Betty. "But you have been very patient, Hugh, and the winding up of my yarn won't take long. The crisis begins with Chalmers' coming to Stockbridge."

"For me, that was the denouement, the end of all things," I said shamefacedly, and Warriner roared.

"You see, I never suspected even that I was cast for the role of breaker up of homes," he remarked meditatively. "Betty and I were good friends, of course, but once you appeared on the sky line I was reduced to playing gooseberry. Besides, there never had been anyone else than Hilda for me."

"I'm only trying to explain my conduct," I retorted. "I'm well aware that nothing can excuse it. Shoot, Betty."

"Of course, Chalmers was coming to Stockbridge," went on Betty, "for the simple reason that Hilda was visiting me. Nevertheless, I was looking forward to his arrival, because he had promised to dig up certain data for me.

"You remember the list of Hildebrand tragedies as given by Eunice; how Yardley Hildebrand had succeeded his father, Oliver, in 1860, and had died the following year; then how his younger brother, Randall, had become master of the 'Hundred,' and had only lived a twelvemonth; and so on.

"Well, I thought it might be useful to ascertain all these dates exactly, and, in order to do that, it would be necessary to take transcripts from the parish register at S. Saviour's. I wrote to Chalmers, and asked him to look up this information and bring it with him when he came to Stockbridge. Not only did he do this, but he took the trouble to type out the complete record, so that all the facts in the case might lie under the eye. I'll read it."

Betty pulled out a folded sheet of paper from the portfolio lying in her lap and began:

Yardley Hildebrand, b. March 5, 1806; succeeded his father, Oliver, 1860; d. June 20, 1861.

Randall Hildebrand, b. May 11, 1809; succeeded his brother, Yardley, 1861; d. June 22, 1862.

Horace Hildebrand, elder son of Randall, b. December 4, 1830; succeeded his father, 1862; d. June 22, 1865.

Richard Hildebrand, younger son of Randall, b. June 1, 1835; succeeded his elder brother, 1865; d. June 20, 1918.

Francis Hildebrand Graeme, great-nephew to Richard, b. April 13, 1874; succeeded his great-uncle, 1918; d. June 21, 1919.

Eunice Trevor, b. September 2, 1892; d. June 20, 1920.

"And now we may add a final entry," continued Betty: "John Thaneford, nephew to Richard, b. July 16, 1892; d. June 22, 1922."

Betty handed me over the list. "Do you notice anything peculiar about those dates?" she asked.

I read the paper through, and then again. "You have already pointed out," I began hesitatingly, "that the tenure of 'Hildebrand Hundred' was for the comparatively brief period of one to three years. Except for Richard, who held the property for over fifty."

"I don't mean that. Examine the actual dates."

I scanned the record with still greater attention. "Ah!" I exclaimed, "here *is* something strange. Everyone of these men, and Eunice, too, died in June; yes, and on a day of the month that varied between the twentieth and the twenty-second. Is that what you had in mind?"

"Yes, and it seemed to indicate clearly that those particular three days, the twentieth, twenty-first, and twenty-second of June——"

"In astronomical parlance, the summer solstice," interrupted Warriner.

"——was the danger period."

"Yes, and then?"

"Your letter came, saying that you had been obliged to enter the library to look after the window repairs; you added that you would probably have to go again to finish up the job. As I have already told you, that letter reached me on Thursday morning, June the twenty-first; Chalmers and I left at once for New York. On the way down I succeeded in reading the cypher, and so got Fielding Thaneford's

message in full."

"But how in the world——" I began.

"You'll know in good time," cut in Betty. "First, I want you to consider another of my sources of information. Here it is," and she held up a small book bound in tattered leather.

"This," continued my wife, "is a diary kept by Horace Hildebrand, who succeeded to the 'Hundred' in 1862, and died June 22, 1865. The notes refer chiefly to the weather, a record that many country gentlemen are fond of keeping for their own amusement. The only period which interests us is that covering those fatal June days in 1863, 1864, and 1865."

Betty thumbed over the leaves, and stopped at the latter part of June, 1863.

"You see that the twentieth, twenty-first, and twenty-second are described as overcast and rainy. Now for 1864:

"'June 20, cloudy; June 21, clear. (Note: A total eclipse of the sun took place to-day, the period of partial and complete darkness lasting from 10.45 A. M. to 2.10 P. M.); June 22, cloudy.' Finally, we take 1865:

"'June 20, rainy; June twenty-first, heavy rains; June 22, fine and clear.' This is the last entry in the book as Horace Hildebrand was found dead later on in that same day.

"Just one more point. What possible hypothesis can we establish to account for Richard Hildebrand's half century of immunity? Now it happened that I had questioned Effingham on this very subject before I left the 'Hundred.' Effingham had lived, as boy and man, on the Hildebrand estate for over sixty years. Consequently, he knew Marse Richard, as he called him, very well, and was familiar with his habits of life.

"According to Effingham, Richard Hildebrand disliked the warm weather, and always left the 'Hundred' the first of June; he would spend the summer at the 'Old White,' returning to Maryland toward the end of September. But in 1918, the last year of his life, he was too feeble to go away from home. His favorite room was the library, and there he was found dead the evening of the twentieth of June, 1918. He was supposed to have died of heart disease; certainly there was no suspicion of foul play.

"So that was the sum total of my investigations to date," concluded Betty. "Do you make anything of it?"

"It's beyond me," I confessed frankly. "What is the answer?"

"Only Fielding Thaneford himself can give it," replied Betty. "Here is his fully decoded statement, and I'll ask Chalmers to read it aloud. As I said a moment ago, we worked it out together that long day on the train. When we reached town we had the whole story, and knew what to expect. Except one thing: Would it be a cloudy day? But it turned out fair and hot, with only a faint suggestion of thunder in the air. There was a bad wreck on the Cape Charles route, and anyhow we had missed the connection for the morning train. So we hired a car, threw away the speedometer, and made to strike the 'Hundred' by midday. We couldn't quite do it, but the tide of chance had turned at last, and it didn't matter. Now go on, Chalmers."

Warriner ruffled the dozen or more sheets of paper between his fingers and began:

Chapter XXII

The Grapes of Wrath

Thane Court, August third, eighteen-ninety-two. Now that a son is born to me, Fielding Thaneford of King William county, Maryland, it is fitting that I set down in order the form and measure of my vengeance upon the traitor Yardley Hildebrand; also upon those who may come after him until the end of time.

Back in 1854 I was a young man of nine-and-twenty. Yardley Hildebrand was some twenty years my senior, yet we were close friends owing to our common interest in scientific studies, he as a chemist and I as a physicist, specializing in optics. Then Evelyn Mansfield came and stood between us.

It was his wealth which turned the scale. Not that Evelyn was mercenary, but financial disaster had overtaken the Mansfields, and Yardley Hildebrand had promised to play the part of a ministering angel in rehabilitating the family fortunes, the inexorable condition being that Evelyn should favor his suit. And I was a comparatively poor man.

They were married in 1855, she a slip of a girl of barely nineteen years, and he a mature man of fifty. It is hardly necessary to say that he kept none of his lavish promises. I cared nothing about that, but when he began to mistreat his wife, to the extent of using personal violence, my half-formed plans started to take definite shape.

Evelyn died suddenly in the late summer of 1860, the same year that Yardley Hildebrand succeeded his father in the ownership of the "Hundred." As S. Saviour's was then undergoing repairs, the funeral had to take place from the house. I stood by her coffin, set up in state in the long ballroom; and, snatching a favorable opportunity, I pushed back the loose sleeve of her gown, and saw with my own eyes the blue and purple marks of his hands on her delicate flesh. Whereupon, I made oath that both Yardley himself and his heirs forever should pay in their own bodies for all that Evelyn had suffered and endured. Perhaps I was a little mad then; it may be that I am still of a disordered brain, and so not fully responsible for the things which I have done in making up the tale of my revenge. Whatever the legal aspects of the case, be sure of this: I am neither

sorry nor ashamed.

My opportunity quickly came. Yardley determined to go abroad; the pretense was that he needed a change to divert his mind and blunt the keen edge of his grief. But I managed to keep a straight face when he mumbled out his excuses and explanations.

Yardley Hildebrand had it in mind to build an adequate library at the "Hundred"; the villain had his cultivated tastes, and he wanted something which should be unique of its kind. Since my regular profession was that of an architect he naturally consulted me. I sketched out my ideas, and they met with his approval; he offered me the commission, and I accepted with alacrity. Then he sailed away, leaving me to carry out the plans—those in my sketchbook and some others that I had not taken the trouble to show him.

Modern physicists are just now beginning to talk about the invisible heat and light rays composed of high frequency vibrations. But long before Crooks gave the X-ray to the world I had discovered and had succeeded in isolating what I choose to call the Sigma ray. Some fine day it will be rediscovered, and the lucky man will get a new lot of capital letters to tack onto his name; and perhaps a ribbon for his buttonhole, and a pension from his grateful government. I shall not care; the Sigma ray has repaid me a thousandfold for the trouble I took to establish its existence; as a lethal agent it stands without a peer, instantaneously destructive to all forms of organic life.

Naturally, I do not propose to state the formula by means of which I was enabled to construct a filter capable of segregating my beloved Sigma ray *from ordinary sunlight*. Ah, that statement is illuminating, is it not! Suffice it to say that my filter looks like common glass. It may be moulded so as to resemble the familiar bullseye lens; and, if desirable, it can be colored. Now do you begin to appreciate the significance of the stained glass window on the right of the great fireplace in the library of "Hildebrand Hundred," the one depicting the Israelitish spies carrying their clusters of purple grapes?

If you choose to make an interesting experiment, arrange for the erection of a staging or an extension ladder outside the "Spy" window, so as to bring your eye on a level with the third grape in the upper row of the largest bunch. You will find that the line of your view, through this particular bullseye, impinges upon the head of any person who may chance to be sitting in the swivel-chair before the big, teakwood desk. As the chair is immovably secured to the floor by steel

bolts passing through its mushroom base, it is evident that the relationship of the chair and of that particular bullseye will remain fixed; at any rate, one would have to go to some trouble to disturb it.

But the mere haphazard introduction of the Sigma ray into the room would not suit my purpose; my revenge would not be complete unless I could see it in operation. And so it was necessary to arrange some sort of clockwork mechanism to spring the trap. I confess to being somewhat grandiose in my conceptions, and accordingly I decided to press into my service no less an agency than the solar system itself.

If you will go into the library of "Hildebrand Hundred" on any month of the year outside of June you will see that the direct rays of the sun never reach the upper part of the "Spy" window; consequently, the Sigma ray is not brought into being. But, as the summer solstice approaches, the sun continues to rise higher and higher in the heavens until, in the three or four days around the twenty-first of June, it has reached its ultimate altitude with reference to the zenith. For the few minutes immediately before or after high noon on any of the aforesaid days the sun is in such a position that its beams will pass through the purple bullseye lens that forms the third grape in the upper row of the largest cluster. And in passing through it will become decomposed into the Sigma ray, and will fall on the head of him who sits at the great desk, exercising the authority of his lordship over "Hildebrand Hundred."

This is all plain and straightforward, I think. It is unfortunately true that any innocent person who chances to be occupying the seat perilous at the fateful moment will have to bear the weight of the vengeance intended for the guilty. But that risk is really remote, since the great desk and chair are the natural appanage of the Master of the "Hundred"; it will not be usual for anyone else to trespass upon that prerogative. And what more natural procedure than that the Master of the "Hundred," after a tour of his hay fields on a hot June day, should go to the cool of his library and finish up his office business at his desk?

True, there are other contingencies. The Master may come to the room and yet choose to sit elsewhere. Or he may forestall the hammer stroke of doom through the chance of rising from his chair to select a book from a distant shelf; or, finding his match-safe empty, he may go over to the chimney-breast on the hunt for a vesta.

Or again, he may be away from home during the three or four days of fate, or

lying ill in an upstairs room. Finally, should the period of danger be cloudy and overcast the sun may not shine at all, and the whole business must go over for another year. But my patience is very long; I have learned how to wait.

I need not go into the intricate calculations necessary to provide for all the conditions of the problem. Fortunately for my purpose the walls of the projected addition lay at a favorable angle for the carrying out of my designs, and I had only to work out the correct position for the windows and make the proper allowance for the overhang of the roof cornice. The stained glass was made from my own drawings, and I personally set the bullseye lens in its appointed place. The work was finished in May, 1861, and I should have liked to have made a test of my apparatus before Yardley's return from abroad; if there had been any error in my calculations and measurements it would be difficult, later on, to trump up an excuse for making the necessary structural alteration. But, as it turned out, I had made no mistakes.

However, Yardley forestalled my intentions by appearing at the "Hundred" early in May. I bade him welcome, and showed him my completed work. He was pleased and said so, frequently and warmly. I could only smile in acknowledgment of his plaudits and fulsome thanks.

June the twentieth of that same year I sat in my observation post on Sugar Loaf. Through my high-powered telephoto lens I saw Yardley come into the room and sit down at his desk. It was then ten minutes of twelve o'clock. Five minutes later, what looked like a streak of purple flame leaped through the semi-darkness of the room, and Yardley Hildebrand toppled to the floor. The apparatus had worked with meticulous exactness, and Evelyn Mansfield was avenged—at least in part.

Since then I have watched two others of that black line of Hildebrands go to their doom—Randall and Horace. Poor spirited creatures, both of them, and hardly worthy to receive the accolade of my splendid Sigma ray. Randall held his sovereignty for just a year, but Horace had the devil's own luck. Cloudy days saved him, together with one quite unforeseen contingency, an eclipse of the sun on June 21, 1864. On June 20 and 21, 1865, there were heavy rains, and I was furious. But the twenty-second was clear and fine, and lo! he, too, was gathered to his fathers.

Finally, my dearly beloved brother-in-law, Richard, succeeded to the family honors, and perils. That was in 1865 and for seven-and-twenty years he has

managed to evade the stroke through the annoying accident that he prefers the summer climate of "Old White." I intend to give him still further leeway now that my son John, born July 16, 1892, to me and Richard's sister, Jocelyn, is in the field. For Richard is a bachelor, and John Thaneford is the natural heir to the estate. If Richard will listen to reason and make due provision in his will, I am agreeable to allow him full usufruct of the "Hundred" until my son arrives at his majority. Otherwise he, in his turn, shall die like the dog he is, even as the Hildebrands before him have died, alone and in silence, with none to pity and none to save. The instrument of my vengeance is very sure and very patient, and the passage of the years is as nothing to me, sitting perdu in my secret seat on the cliff of Sugar Loaf.

October 1, 1892. Richard is not inclined to listen to my proposal to recognize John as his rightful heir; he even talks of leaving the "Hundred" to his great-nephew on the distaff side, one Francis Graeme.

Be it so; let him eat of the grapes of wrath, and let his teeth be set on edge, even to the third and fourth generation of that accursed race upon which my hate is poured out, now and for evermore.

FIE

THANEFORD.

June 20, 1918. Richard Hildebrand died to-day, and Francis Graeme became Master of the "Hundred."

July 10, 1918. I have offered Francis Graeme his chance on the same terms. He has accepted, and John Thaneford is to be nominated the heir in his will of the residuary estate. But the Sigma ray stands on guard until I am convinced that he intends to keep his plighted word.

F. T.

Chapter XXIII

The End of the Coil

Warriner laid the book on the table, and pulled out his pipe. I think it was a full five minutes before any of us said a word. But Betty kept her hand close-locked in mine.

"Any particular questions?" said Warriner at length.

"If I've got the hang of it," I began, "the Sigma ray was bound to get the man or woman who happened to be sitting in that big chair on the specified dates in June when the sun was in position to shine through the bullseye lens."

"Yes."

"Then I escaped through the accident that, when the window was repaired, the lens got mixed up with the ordinary glass bullseyes."

"Precisely. It had been replaced in a new position, an entirely unknown one. As it happened—pure chance, you understand—the ray of sunshine that fell upon your face at noon that day had passed through a bullseye of common purple glass, and therefore it was harmless. But the Terror was in the room; somewhere it was lying in wait, ready to strike. Do you recall how I kept close to the wall, so as to avoid getting in the path of the direct sunlight? You understand now that I realized the danger, and took the obvious precaution. But John Thaneford was unaware that any change had been made in the position of the death-dealing lens. And so he walked straight into the line of destructive force; and the Sigma ray, being no respecter of persons, proceeded to strike him down."

"I wonder how much he really knew about the whole affair?" queried Betty. "You remember that Eunice expressly acquitted John Thaneford of any actual part in my father's death."

"But he certainly must have been cognizant of the nature of the trap," answered Warriner. "He was the observer at the time of Mr. Graeme's death, the elder Thaneford being physically unable to take his accustomed post on Sugar Loaf. Again, his putting Hugh, bound and helpless, into the fatal chair is unanswerable

evidence that he did possess a guilty knowledge of his father's secret. It makes no moral difference that he had no hand in inventing or setting up the instrument of vengeance. He knew of its existence undoubtedly, and hoped to profit by it. That's enough."

"Have you any theory about the Sigma ray itself?" I asked. "Or rather its effect upon the physical organism?"

"Do you happen to recall the medical testimony given at the coroner's inquest by Doctor Williams of John Hopkins? Well, he testified, in brief, that the autopsy had revealed a most peculiar lesion of the brain; in unprofessional language, the injury might be characterized as a case of greatly intensified sunstroke."

"Yes, I do remember."

"Now there are unexplained anomalies about even ordinary sunstroke," continued Warriner. "Just what are the conditions under which exposures to the rays of the sun may be dangerous?

"In the first place, we may affirm confidently that the peril is not dependent upon the amount of humidity that may be present in the atmosphere. Down in New Orleans, where the air is full of moisture and the thermometer stands high in the scale for weeks at a time, sunstroke is virtually unknown; men and beasts seem equally immune. But let a ten-day heat wave submerge New York City and the emergency hospitals will be full up, while the horses will be wearing plaited straw-bonnets as a protection against the deadly sun.

"Again, there is Fort Yuma in Arizona, the hottest place in the United States, with the possible exception of Death Valley. Yes, it is abnormally hot at Yuma and the air is furnace-dried; the old-timers will tell you that, on really bad days, a man can't drink water fast enough to keep from dying of thirst. Of course, men do die from the effects of the heat, but it isn't our ordinary form of sunstroke. To sum up, then:

"No sunstroke at New Orleans, where it is abnormally humid and hot; and none at Fort Yuma, where it is abnormally dry and hot. But plenty of cases in Paris, Chicago, and New York, where the climate is supposed to be temperate.

"The inference is logical: under certain conditions, one of the invisible, high frequency rays, always present in sunlight, is enabled to get in its deadly work. Unfortunately, we don't know what those conditions are. Perhaps the proportion

of static electricity in the atmosphere may have something to do with it. Anyway, the fact remains that men do die of heat stroke in New York and Paris, while Louisiana and Florida are comparatively free from that particular peril to life."

"Then, according to your theory, it is the Sigma ray which is the active lethal agent in sunlight?"

"Yes, and Fielding Thaneford's invention enabled him to isolate the ray in question, at the same time enormously intensifying its action. Both Graeme and John Thaneford died the instant that it touched them."

"And that was Fielding Thaneford's secret," said Betty, just returned from a flying visit to the nursery, where Little Hugh lay sleeping. "Such a horrible secret!" She shuddered.

"Just as well that it died with him," assented Warriner soberly.

"Still, in the end, he sought to stop the evil thing that he had set in motion," persisted Betty. "He told me all he could; all indeed that it was necessary to know, once I really began to use my wits."

"Which reminds me," I put in, "that you have yet to explain how you finally managed to read the cypher. What put you back on the track?"

"So simple a thing it was, too," laughed Betty. "And so easy to overlook."

"I remember years ago," remarked Warriner, "that, on account of certain rare astronomical conditions, it was possible to see the planet Venus at midday. It took me the longest time to find the star, although I thought I knew just where to look; also all my friends were admiring the spectacle. At last I saw it, and then it was an easy matter to locate it again. I suppose the reason is that I didn't know what to expect; some sort of junior sun, I reckon. In reality, it was only a pin-point of light, but brilliant as a diamond."

"And there's the game of challenging an opponent to find a word in a geographical map," said Betty. "It isn't the one printed in fine type and tucked away in a corner that is so hard to discover. The really invisible word is the one stretching in big, widely separated letters clear across the page."

"Will you *tell* me?" I asked impatiently.

"Here goes then. You remember that I set down my theoretical key-sentence,

thus:"

W O N F O R T O O F O R A T E

"The uncoding went along splendidly for eight places, thus:"

W O N F O R T O
T H A N E C O U

"The rest was gibberish. It follows then that the running off the track must have happened at the ninth substitution and nowhere else."

"Obviously."

"The very morning that your letter about the library window arrived—that is, on June the twenty-first—I was sitting at my desk; for the ten thousand time, more or less, I printed out those distracting capitals:"

W O N F O R T O O F O R A T E

"As I looked at the line of letters I suddenly discovered something entirely new: the five end ones formed the perfectly good English word, *Orate*.

"There is a game, you know, in which you mix up the letters of a long word, such as *Plenipotentiary*, and then try to recombine them into subsidiary words, the biggest list winning the prize. Perhaps there were other esoteric or inside words in my key-sentence, a still deeper meaning and significance to this apparently haphazard collection of alphabetical symbols. I started experimenting, and almost immediately I did get another word, *Fort*. Now I'll write out the series again, using vertical lines to divide off the word-groups. Here it is:"

W O N | F O R T | O O F | O R A T E

"The only perplexity was in the third section, for although *OOF* is a Yiddish slang word for money or cash it isn't much in use in our rural locality; in all probability, old Mr. Thaneford had never even heard of it. All the other words were good English.

"What was the ninth letter, the alphabetical rock upon which my fine theory had gone to pieces? Why it was none other than the second O in that very word, *OOF*. Then I saw the solution in a flash. Do you?"

I shook my head.

"There is another English work which corresponds phonetically to the number 2 or two. Of course it is *TO*. Let us make the substitution, thus:"

W O N | F O R T | O F | O R A T E

"A complete English sentence, you see. It doesn't make very good sense, but that is of no consequence, since it is merely what Chalmers calls er—er—well, what *do* you call it, Chalmers?"

"Mnemonic guide," smiled Warriner. "An artificial aid to one's memory. It would be somewhat easier to write down the key-letters correctly if this absurd sentence were kept in mind. You have to be absolutely accurate in the coding of a cypher message."

"Now then, Hugh, do you see?" demanded my wife.

"Of course I do," I answered eagerly. "The extra O in your original key-sentence is not only wrong in itself, but its inclusion in the series throws everything which follows it into hopeless confusion. Let's try it out."

Rapidly I wrote down the correct key-letters, and underneath them a score of the cypher symbols, thus:

W O N F O R T O F O R A T E W O N F O R T
Q W O T T U I J X I S V A Z P I H N X J X

Taking up the magic square I asked Betty to repeat the formula for uncoding.

"Find where the first key-letter occurs in the top row," said Betty glibly. "For example: W. Then follow that vertical column down until you reach the first letter of the cypher message; in this case: Q. Follow that horizontal line to the extreme left, and you will recover the initial letter of the original message, namely: T. *Da capo ad infinitum. Q. E. D.*"

Together we worked out the first line of the cypher in the leather-bound book. The complete layout ran as follows:

W O N F O R T O F O R A T E W O N F O R T
Q W O T T U I J X I S V A Z P I H N X J X
T H A N E C O U R T A U G U S T T H I R D

"And so on, world without end," commented Betty. "You can imagine how like mad I worked once we were on the train and rushing Southward. For now I knew *why* it was necessary to avoid entering that room, especially at this particular time of year."

The clocks were striking nine, and Chalmers wanted to drop in at "Powersthorp" on his way home. So he bade us good night, climbed into his car, and was off, the red star of his tail-light twinkling through the linden trees bordering upon the driveway. And I remained alone with Betty; only, for a long time, we did not speak; it was not necessary.

There is but a word to add. The walls of the library wing had sustained but little damage in the fire; consequently, the process of rebuilding and refitting was made so much the easier. The stained glass, of course, had been entirely destroyed, but for that there could be few regrets; all those Old Testament pictures had been scenes of hatred and violence and divine wrath. It were better that Little Hugh should never see them and so have his childish imagination darkened. They have been replaced by windows of a softer nature—green pastures and still water, the lilies and poppies of the Parsifal meadows on Good Friday morning, and the peace of the everlasting hills. No chance here for even the unwitting insertion of that terrible purple boss; indeed the grapes of wrath were no longer in existence, for Chalmers Warriner had taken pains to have every bit of the *disjecta membra* of the old windows gathered up and buried in some inaccesible pit, its very location to remain forever hidden from human eyes.

To-day the library at "Hildebrand Hundred," exorcised of its dark spirit, is again our favorite living-room. The teakwood desk and the great swivel-chair were destroyed in the fire, and indeed all the old fittings and hangings have given way to bright and cheerful modern furnishings. As I sit at my desk, writing the final

page of these memoirs, the sun lies warm and glowing upon the oaken floor, but there is no hidden menace in its beauty. The scent of roses floats through the open windows, and I can hear the clip of Betty's garden shears as she cuts off the perfumed coupons of her floral treasures; one by one the gorgeous blooms fall into the waiting basket; our dinner table must be resplendent to-night for Chalmers and Hilda, just back from their honeymoon journey, are coming to us for an intimate *partie carrée*.

And in the middle distance stands Little Hugh, the breeze roughing up his sleek, black poll, his legs planted confidently wide apart, and his gaze traveling outward upon the fair, broad acres that some day will be all his own; my lawful son and heir, a true Hildebrand of "Hildebrand Hundred."

Truly, God is good and life is sweet.

THE END

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