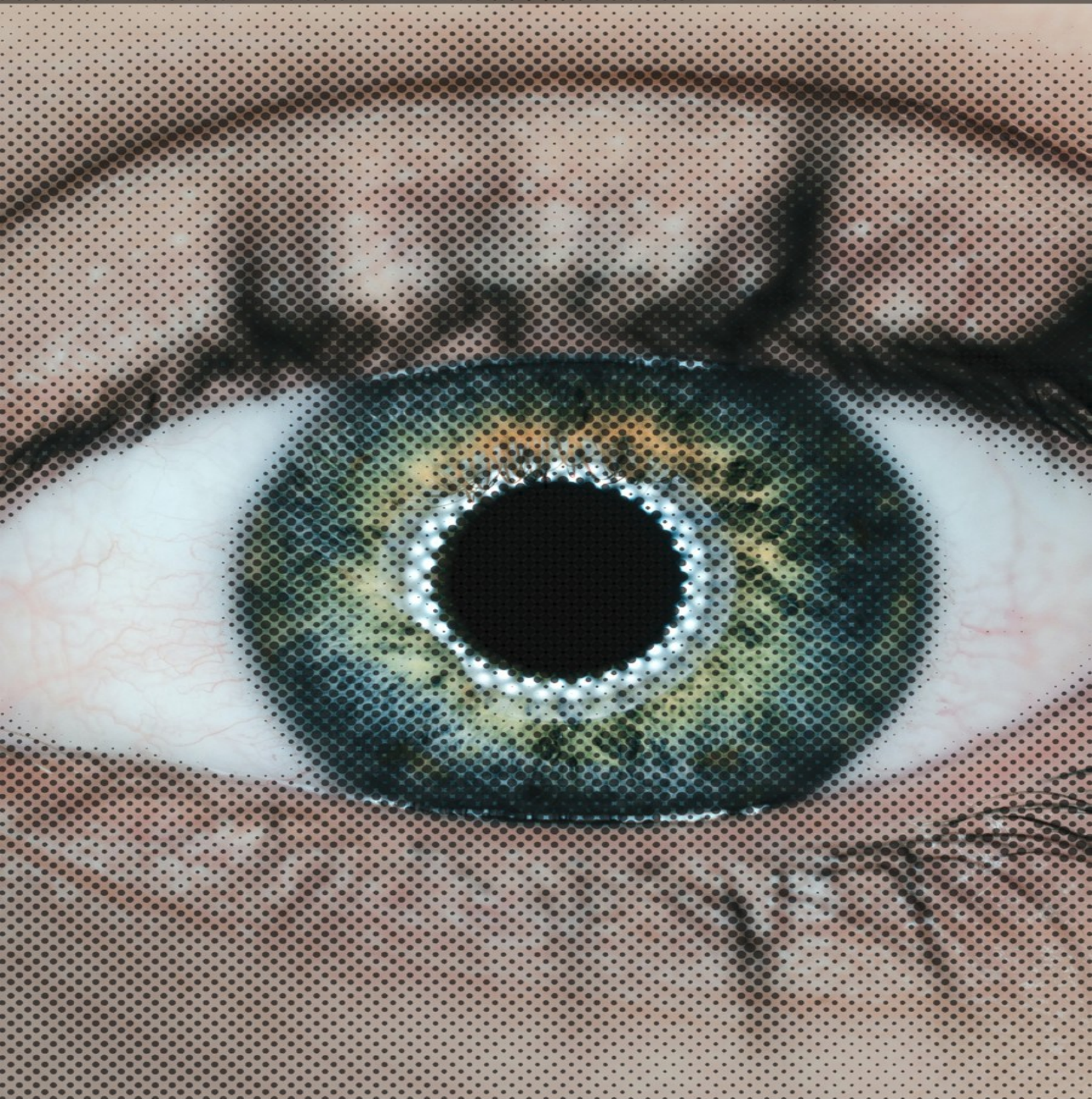


Ethel Lina White



The Third Eye

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PART ONE: THERE—

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I. — ROUNABOUT

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FROM the first, Professor Freeman was reluctant to let his young sister-in-law—Caroline—accept the post of games mistress at the Abbey School.

He rubbed his heel over his instep, scratched his cheek, bit his nails, and generally ran through the gamut of nervous mannerisms for which he scolded his two small sons. When the practical sex—as represented by his wife and sister-in-law—pressed him for some logical objection, he was unable to justify his misgivings.

"It's such a roundabout business," he complained to his wife. "You broadcast the fact that our Beloved Fool"—he smiled affectionately at Caroline—"wants a job, and some one who's staying in Wiltshire goes to tea with some one who can put her in touch with some one who can offer her work."

"But it's a blinking school," declared Caroline, who was studying the prospectus. "Look at the list of staff. They all have degrees."

As the non-brilliant member of a family who appeared to acquire academic honours as easily as the average person solves a crossword puzzle, she had a reverence for alphabetical tags. But the Professor merely wrinkled up his nose.

"If you'd coached as many thick-headed students as I have," he said, "you'd give the credit—if any—to their unlucky tutors. And I fail to see the good of it in these over-specialised days."

"Don't be reactionary," remarked his wife, Lesley Freeman, M.A. "Tell us instead exactly what you have against the school."

"Well, to begin with, it's a private school," grumbled the Professor. "I know from personal experience that these places can be hotbeds of jealousy and scandal."

"Don't reason by analogy," chimed in Caroline, eager to prove that even she possessed a vocabulary. "You don't know how I yearn to earn my first salary. I shall spend it going to Switzerland to the Winter Sports."

"I suppose I can't stop you. But there's plenty of room for you here."

Caroline avoided meeting her sister's eye, for the flat had only two bedrooms. She herself had slept for eleven weeks on a short divan in the dining-room. As the period included a heat-wave, and as she was tall and supercharged with energy, the experience had proved slightly trying.

"You're angels," she murmured. "But I must get a job."

Lesley backed her up, for she was intelligent as well as clever. A genuine student, and more interested in textbooks than facial charts, she knew she could not compete with Caroline's bloom at the breakfast-table. Seeing that he was beaten, the Professor gave in.

"You must first let me make some inquiries," he stipulated. "I seem to recollect that Hawkins knows a man who has a daughter at the Abbey School."

"You're going to ask some one who knows some one," jeered Caroline. "A bit roundabout. Stop quacking, Donald Duck. I'm going to find my most flattering photograph to send to Mrs. Nash."

"I feel worried about her," declared the Professor when she had burst out of the room. "She's such a babe."

"Babe, my eye," was the elegant retort of Lesley Freeman, M.A.

Checked in his lapse into sentiment, the Professor went to his club, where he ran his quarry to earth in the reading-room. Mr. Hawkins, who was headmaster of a preparatory school, bore a character for scrupulous impartiality. Although no one else was present, he was obviously uneasy about conversation in a place dedicated to silence.

"Yes," he agreed, speaking in a whisper. "Major Buck has a daughter at the Abbey School. He told me recently that he was satisfied with her progress. She matriculated with honours."

"Good," commented the Professor. "Then I take it he would recommend the school?"

Mr. Hawkins weighed the question.

"He is sending his younger daughter elsewhere," he remarked.

"Any specific reason?"

"Nothing definite. Perhaps some dissatisfaction with the discipline. He made some vague mention about not approving of one woman having too much influence. That is positively all I can tell you."

Mr. Hawkins lapsed into inaudibility at the entrance of a member, and the Professor knew that the subject was closed. When he returned to the flat his womenfolk held an inquest on his findings.

"Of course the high-handed woman is Mrs. Nash," said Lesley. "Well—it's her own school."

"And the discipline wouldn't affect me," beamed Caroline. "It's a luminous thought that at last I shall give discipline—not receive it."

As the Professor continued to pull his chin his wife made a suggestion.

"Could you tackle the Major direct?"

"He's abroad. Besides, it's unnecessary, for the deduction is obvious. The school is evidently going down, but the Major thinks it will last his elder daughter's time."

"Mine, too," declared Caroline. "I only want a ref." But the Professor was far from satisfied.

"Before I give the Beloved Fool my blessing," he said, "I must know two things. First—why the games mistress left only three weeks after the beginning of the term; second—why Mrs. Nash didn't apply to an agency, in the usual way, for her successor."

"That can soon be settled," his wife told him. "Mrs. Gloucester is expected home this afternoon. So we'll go over there tonight after coffee."

Mrs. Gloucester was the friend who had been the intermediary in Caroline's interests—over afternoon tea drunk from pedigree China in a stately Wiltshire drawing-room. She was a kind-hearted lady and possessed a talent for benevolent manipulation. In this special case she was beaming over her success when she greeted the Professor and his wife that evening.

"I do hope Caroline will get the post," she said. "I spoke strongly in her favour. The personal recommendation counts for so much after an unlucky experience."

"What unlucky experience?" asked the Professor, pouncing on the admission.

"Oh, the other poor games mistress. She was found dead in bed. Heart failure."

While the Professor and his wife were expressing conventional horror, Mrs. Gloucester—unprompted—answered the second objection.

"But you know what rumour is. All sorts of ridiculous stories got about. So Mrs. Nash felt that if she applied to an agency after all the best mistresses were snapped up she'd be landed with some odd-come-short. She preferred to get a temporary coach, and look around. Then a Miss Yaxley-Moore, who has an administration post in the Abbey School, chanced to mention it in a letter to her half-sister in Wiltshire. She spoke about it casually when we were calling on her. I saw my chance—and leaped for it...Really, I think I ought to charge both sides a commission."

"But is Mrs. Nash prepared to consider Caroline, when she is such a roundabout acquisition?" queried the Professor, who was fishing for an opening.

"I stood Sponsor for her," replied Mrs. Gloucester modestly. "That is one advantage of being in a book of reference."

"And your hostess in Wiltshire—whose half-sister is at the school—is she also duly documented?" asked the Professor. He felt that this lady—as the unknown factor—was the most important link in the chain, so he was really relieved by Mrs. Gloucester's assurance.

"That goes without saying, or I should not have mentioned Caroline to her. Both she and her half-sister, Miss

Yaxley-Moore, belong to those families that are older than the Peerage. She is one of the most influential ladies in the district. Of course, I saw her in her own background—a beautiful period house which has been in her family for generations."

She paused for a breath before she uttered the name which was loaded with such fateful significance for Caroline.

"Miss Bat, of Bat House."

Unfortunately the girl was at home in the flat coaching her nephews in the gentle art of boxing, while to the Professor and his wife it was of secondary importance, since the main question had been answered, and therefore not worthy of mention. When they returned, Caroline listened to their report with unexpected gravity.

"Don't you want to go?" asked the Professor hopefully.

"Of course," she replied. "Only—I've thought and thought about getting a job. I've wished—I've even prayed. And now at last it comes, through some one's death...It seems unlucky."

Perhaps it was even more unlucky that the Professor had not the gift of clair-audience, and so was unable to hear Mrs. Gloucester's remark to her husband that night.

"I felt so sorry for the poor dear Professor having his sister-in-law wished on him for so long that I was furious with myself for blurring out about the rumours connected with the other games mistress's death. Luckily, her sister took no notice, and the Professor was far too wise to raise any question."

"What were the rumours?" asked her husband sleepily.

"Oh, the usual hush-hush affair. The doctor had been attending her for heart-strain, so he was able to write a certificate...But the story got about that she had been frightened to death."

II. — THE OMEN

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EVERYONE knew that Caroline was desperately eager to get a job; but no one knew that she nearly turned back at the gates of the Abbey School.

She always regarded herself as the family failure because of her inability to pass examinations. When her mother's death disclosed a financial crisis and her relatives had no option but to capitalise her skill at games, she writhed in secret humiliation. Her brother-in-law's enforced hospitality was another thorn in her flesh, since she was quite unaware of his admiration for his Beloved Fool.

He grew quite dejected in anticipation of her loss, for there was a clear daylight quality about her nature which appealed to him as much as the charm of youth and her vivid, attractive face. But he was also worried about her character, for her own sake.

Impulsive, warm-hearted and imprudent, she also possessed unusually rigid principles harnessed to an incapacity to accept compromise which he feared might send her crashing into disaster.

He tried to put her on her guard when they were having tea together in a dark, smoky café before she caught the local bus out to the Abbey School. Against her wish, he had insisted on coming with her to Plume—the old west-country cathedral town which was as far as she could travel by rail; but, now that their parting was near, she was only too glad of his company.

"I don't wish to quack," he told her, "but there is something I must say. It's this: Keep clear of every one your first term. Don't make friends—and, above all, don't make enemies. Steer clear of any quarrel. Don't be curious about other people's business, or you may find yourself drawn into an intrigue which will spin you round like the drum which shuffles the counterfoils in the Irish Sweep, and land you up somewhere where you least want to be."

"I promise," said Caroline soberly.

They were the sole patrons of the tea-room, and she was vaguely depressed by the drizzling rain on the window-panes and the empty clutter of chairs. As though he read her thoughts, the Professor tried to tempt her.

"Still time to change your mind," he said, "Come back to London with me."

"Quack, quack," she murmured mechanically as she looked at her watch. "It's time to go, darling Donald Duck."

She felt an actual pang, after she had climbed into the bus, to see him standing below her on the pavement.

"Shall I promise not to change my shirt until you come back?" he asked.

"No—promise not to change your tailor."

Pleased with the compliment to his new suit, the Professor grinned bashfully; but his smile faded as the bus began to move. Her face, too, was serious as she rolled through dingy utilitarian quarters of the ancient town, which smelt of petrol—over a stagnant green river—past the last villa—and then out into the twilit country, where owls hooted dismally in the woods and the white scuts of rabbits

were dimly visible as they scampered amid clumps of bracken.

Her luggage had been sent out by the local carrier, so that the driver was able to drop her almost outside the gates of the school. As she covered the short distance to the lodge, something happened which filled her with horror.

As a rule she walked quickly, with her head erect and looking before her, as though she saw some one she loved standing at the end of a long, straight road. This special characteristic was to prove of vital importance at a future crisis of her life, but it was absent that night.

While she moved slowly and unwillingly, dragging her feet and with her eyes fixed upon the road, a dark object writhed across her path and disappeared into the long grass which bordered the ditch.

"A snake—and I nearly trod on it," she shuddered.

She was so unnerved by the incident that she was almost on the point of waiting for the first bus back to Plume, lest it should prove an omen of ill-fortune. But while she waited in the greenish gloom common-sense prevailed, reminding her that the reptile was probably but a harmless grass-snake and prodding her through the lodge gates and up the drive.

The Abbey was now represented only by a pile of ruins in the grounds, while the house was one of the stately homes of England, whose owner could afford the cost of its maintenance no longer. It was a huge biscuit-stucco erection, with a pillared portico and a double flight of stone steps leading up to an imposing entrance.

Caroline had to wait some time before her ring was answered. She stood forlornly gazing at beds of waterlogged

dahlias and dripping laurels until the door was opened by a pleasant-faced young man-servant in a striped linen coat.

"I'm Miss Watts," she told him. "Mrs. Nash is expecting me."

As she spoke, she got the uneasy impression of the birth of a smile behind the man's eyes.

"This way, please," he said.

He conducted her across a vast hall with a slippery parquet floor and into an immense drawing-room. It was a handsome apartment, but faintly suggestive of board meetings—for although most of the family furniture had been bought with the house, the place had already acquired an institutional air.

"If you will take a seat I'll tell Miss Melody you are here," offered the man.

"No," corrected Caroline firmly. "I wish to see Mrs. Nash."

She could not tell whether she were super-sensitive, but again she had the uncomfortable suspicion that the man was suppressing some secret amusement.

"Mrs. Nash is never disturbed in the evening," he said. "I'll send Miss Melody."

Feeling chilled by her reception, Caroline sat waiting until a little elderly woman hustled into the room with the air of having just caught a train. She had a small frost-bitten face, wispy grey hair and sunken brown eyes, under a straight fringe. Somehow she reminded Caroline of an irritable old dog who would snap at strangers, yet be faithful to its owner till the last whistle.

She shook hands in a nervous manner, and spoke abruptly, without looking at Caroline.

"As it is so late, I expect you would like to have your meal at once and then go straight to your room."

While Caroline tried to assure her of her success as a mind-reader, Miss Melody bustled her into the dining-room, which was blazing with electric clusters, as though lit for a banquet. It was also large and handsomely furnished, but it had a vaguely stripped appearance, due to unfaded crimson patches on the olive-brown wall, where family portraits had formerly hung.

One place was laid in the middle of a long, bare table. Miss Melody led Caroline towards it, only stopping at the door to switch off all the lights, with the exception of a single pendant.

"When you've finished," she said, "ring for Parker, and he will show you to your bedroom."

Stranded in the midst of a vast gloom, Caroline did not enjoy her first meal, which consisted of cold meat and salad for her first course, and tinned apricots and custard for her sweet.

When she had rung the bell, the manservant—Parker—appeared after a long interval. Their footsteps alone breaking the silence, she followed him up a wide branching staircase to a gallery—now denuded of its portraits—through a door at one end, and along the corridor of the east wing.

As she was sleeping at its extreme limit, he led her through a confusion of narrow passages, with uneven boards, to her room, which was small and reminded her of a single apartment in a popular hotel. Every inch of space was utilised to make room for the fumed-oak suite. There was a

brown and buff Wilton carpet, beige casement-cloth curtains, and sheets of glass over the table and toilet-chest. All the surfaces were sticky with moisture, while the air held the smell of damp fabric.

She was looking around her with a forlorn expression when Miss Melody bustled in with a coffee-tray.

"I thought you would like a hot drink," she said nervously. "May I have a cup with you? Do you smoke?"

She opened her cigarette-case and began to pour out coffee with shaky haste. As she inhaled her first mouthful of smoke, Caroline's spirits began to rise.

"It's frightfully decent of you," she said. "I feel normal again. But I wish I could see Mrs. Nash and be formally approved. You see, I didn't have a personal interview."

Miss Melody bit her cigarette as though she wanted to hurt it. "You've nothing to worry about," she said. "You're young—and you haven't reached a vulnerable salary-point."

"But where is Mrs. Nash?"

Miss Melody crossed the room and pointed to a large lighted window in the opposite wing. It was curtained with some light silk which glowed whitely giving the effect of transparency.

"That is Mrs. Nash's private suite," she told Caroline. "She is with Miss Yaxley-Moore. So she must not be disturbed."

The peculiar note in her voice corresponded with the man-servant's flickering smile. It created an atmosphere of insinuation which was distasteful to Caroline.

"Who is Miss Yaxley-Moore?" she asked.

"The matron."

"And you?"

"Housekeeper. I'm Mrs. Nash's oldest friend and I've been here from the beginning. I may not have certificates, but I work all round the clock and do my best to stop leakage."

"Yes, I noticed you turned out the lights in the dining-room... What is the school like?"

"Its main line is social. To quote from an advertisement, we train the girls 'to become beautiful ladies.' But they can enter for all the examinations. No obstacles—and all the facilities."

"I see." Caroline frowned slightly. "This is going to be a change to me after a public school."

To her surprise Miss Melody burst into a vehement defence of the school.

"Girls must have the proper preparation for the life they are to lead," she declared. "Our pupils are society girls. Never a term without a title. Besides, this place is a real achievement. Mrs. Nash built it up from nothing...Look at it now. This magnificent building. Every mortgage cleared. And nothing foreign—not even a cooking-egg."

"Well, the charges are stiff," hinted Caroline.

"So are the overheads. Mrs. Nash's sons are still a heavy drain. One is at Oxford and the other at Marlborough. So she's not been able to accumulate any reserve. A few bad terms would break her."

As she listened to the confidence, Caroline suddenly remembered the Professor's advice to ignore other people's business. It was an uncomfortable reminder that already she had asked a number of questions. To change the subject, she crossed to the window, from whence she could trace the

outlines of a huddle of broken pillars and arches beyond the opposite wing.

"I suppose those are the Abbey ruins," she remarked. "They look quite creepy."

"Nervous?" asked Miss Melody sharply.

"No."

"Good job. We've had one nervous mistress, and one is more than enough." Miss Melody laid her cup down on the table and cleared her throat. "I've come here specially to talk to you, because you're a newcomer. I want to tell you what a wonderful woman Mrs. Nash is. Her husband was killed in the War and she was left with two sons to bring up...This school is her answer. And I do most earnestly wish to impress on you the need of absolute loyalty to her interests."

"But all that's taken for granted," said Caroline uneasily.

Miss Melody continued to stare at her as she lowered her voice to a husky whisper.

"No. I don't believe in gossip, but before you've been here long you'll know what I mean. One can't explain things to a fool—and if you're not a fool you won't need any explanation...Good-night."

When she was alone Caroline stood at the open window, listening to the sigh of the rain rustling through the ivy on the walls. A heavy wet scent of drenched heliotrope rose from the garden-beds below, while across the gulf of darkness Mrs. Nash's room glowed like a lighted Chinese lantern.

She gazed at it with troubled eyes as she remembered the omen of the snake.

"I wish I hadn't come," she thought. "I'm only here because the other mistress died...I wonder if this is her room?"

She slept badly on her first night. Besides being homesick, she was full of nervous fancies which made her shrink from occupying a bed where some one might have died recently. For some time she lay awake, starting at every creaking board before she drifted into a semi-unconscious state in which she could still hear the rustle of the rain while her brain played the strange pranks of dreams.

She thought that she was awake, but was unable to stir, because of a heavy fear of something stirring inside the bed, which paralysed every muscle and locked every joint. She did not know how long it endured, but at last her fingers flexed again and she switched on the light.

As she sat up, she realised that she was really awake, and in a strange but commonplace room. In spite of her relief, she could not shake off the impression of her dream immediately. That sudden drainage of power in the moment of peril appeared to her the more horrible because of her own confidence in her strength and agility.

"Is it a warning dream?" she wondered with a flicker of prescience.

Ashamed of her folly, she doubled her arm and felt her muscle before she snapped off the light again.

The illuminated square still glowed in the opposite wing. As she gazed across at it one of the women in the room must have moved closer to the window, for the blurred

silhouette of a gigantic black head was thrown upon the curtain.



III. — THE FIRST DAY

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CAROLINE was aroused from heavy sleep by the clanging of a bell. Jumping up in sudden fright, she realised that the sun was shining in through the ivy-hung window, and that it was her first day at school in a new capacity.

After dressing quickly, she opened her door and peeped into the corridor. Two schoolgirls who were loitering there turned and scanned her with merciless criticism. Both were immaculate, from the cut of their tailored flannel frocks to the set of their water-waved hair; but Caroline, being but a term's remove from them, could enter into their mentality.

She gave them back stare for stare, until their eyes began to waver. Pleased with her first taste of discipline, she looked away from them, to gaze in astonishment at a tall figure that was striding down the corridor.

At one time the woman might have been handsome, but the lines of her figure were lost in bulk, while her face had sagged and deepened in tint to the colour of port wine. Her eyes—violet-blue—were bloodshot and set in dark pouches. Her lips were coarse, her nose an heirloom of Norman period.

An ancient bath-robe of orange towelling was open to display creased purple pyjamas. To complete Caroline's amazement, her hair was set with metal clips and she wore a rubber chin-strap with perfect unconcern.

Instead of showing derision, the supercilious schoolgirls made way for her with every sign of respect. They were

waiting to smile, eager to be noticed; but she pushed past them, staring the while at Caroline with insolent scrutiny.

"New, aren't you?" she asked, speaking thickly as though her tongue were swollen.

"Yes," replied Caroline.

"But not here for long. I presume you want to act for the films, like every pretty young teacher since Madeleine Carroll?"

Her caustic tone overwhelmed Caroline with confusion. Then, as though she had secret knowledge of the chink in her armour, she went on to strike the girl in her tender spot.

"Have you the usual string of letters after your name, like the tail of a kite?"

"No," confessed Caroline. "I'm here to teach games."

"Teach games?" The woman burst into a loud laugh. "That always strikes me as the limit in feebleness." She turned to the two schoolgirls. "You're both 'learning' to ride. Well, how do you think I was taught?... I was stuck on a blood-horse when I was three. The groom gave it a whack—and it was up to me to stick on...That was how we learned...Like me to take you over the sticks tomorrow?"

"Oh, yes, please," shouted the girls.

"Well, I'll see about it. What the hell are you blocking the way for?... Oh, it's Kewpie, blushing like the dawn. Too much dawn, Kewpie."

Caroline turned as a door opened and a cheerful young woman squeezed her way out into the corridor. Although she was officially listed as "Miss Cooper, B.A., London, Bedford College, Honours History," the aptness of her nickname was evident in her slanting blue eyes and broad

spraying smile. She wore her hair in silver-blond curls and was brightly rouged, which accounted for the alleged blush.

Grinning at Caroline, she stood respectfully on one side to allow the woman in the bath-robe to pass. The little group waited in silence, watching her as she strode down the corridor. In spite of an unlovely and grotesque appearance, she commanded homage by the force of a dynamic and flamboyant personality.

"Who is she?" asked Caroline when she had disappeared down the passage.

"Yaxley-Moore," replied Kewpie. "She's the Matron." Then she turned to the schoolgirls and added: "Don't count on the jumping. You know Mrs. Nash is against it."

"Oh, she'll listen to her Master's Voice," muttered one of the girls as they sauntered away.

Caroline could hardly believe her ears, especially as Kewpie chose to be deaf.

"Did that brat dare to hint that the Head is under some one's thumb?" she asked.

"I didn't hear." Kewpie changed the subject as they began to thread their way through the narrow passages towards the main corridor. "Those girls are titled pupils introduced by Yaxley-Moore. So she gives them preferential treatment... Did you sleep well?"

"Not too badly for a strange bed. I-I suppose I had the other games mistress's room?"

"Yes. But she didn't die of anything infectious. It was heart. She strained it getting her Bergman Osterberg Dip. She looked strong—big and fair, you know—but she was