

Ethel Lina White

*They See
in Darkness*

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PROLOGUE

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OLDTOWN was damp, picturesque and historic—a collection of gracious buildings set in a tree-lined valley. Its heart was the Square where the dim houses slanted crazily, as though they were built with a pack of ancient cards. They gave the impression of swaying in the November wind which shook the stripped branches of the Spanish chestnuts.

Standing in the big-bellied bow-window of the County Club, the Chief Constable, Colonel Pride, smoked as he chatted to his guest—a retired Indian judge whom he had known in the East. The Colonel's face was scalded scarlet by tropical sun, which had also bleached his flaxen brows and lashes. In contrast with his white hair, his blue eyes looked youthfully keen as he watched a girl cross the cobbles on perilous heels.

She was tall, slender and fair, with a finished appearance, as though much time and thought had been spent to achieve an effect. When she drew nearer, it was possible to see the exquisite moulding of her face and the porcelain delicacy of her colouring. Her expression was bored, to demonstrate the nonchalance exacted by a reputation for beauty and poise.

The Indian judge noticed his old friend's absorption with cynical amusement, blent with surprise. As Colonel Pride had been immune to woman during his younger days, his present interest in youth appeared somewhat ominous.

"Pretty girl," he probed.

"I suppose so," agreed the Colonel in a grudging voice. "I believe she is by way of being our local beauty."

"Who is she?"

"Simone Mornington-Key. Mother's a widow. They live in Old Court."

He nodded across the Square to a red brick Queen Anne mansion, its front door opening flush with the pavement.

In contradiction with his indifference, the Colonel continued to stare at the girl with so concentrated a gaze, that his friend felt a hint would not be misplaced.

"She's too modern for *our* generation," he said.

As he spoke, the girl looked up at the Club window. Recognising the Colonel, she inclined her head in the precision-bow of a monarch who had practised it during a long reign. Since the attraction was obviously not mutual, the Judge asked a direct question.

"Interested in her, Pride?"

"Like hell I am," declared the Colonel. "That girl is an object of interest not only to myself but to every policeman in the town. For all we know to the contrary, she is a murderess."

The words jolted the Judge out of his composure.

"A murderess?" he echoed. "That beautiful calm face...But I should know exactly how little that means. Mere facade...Why is she at large?"

"At present, she is only under general suspicion," explained the Chief Constable. He lowered his voice before he continued. "A family in this town is being systematically wiped out. They are all legatees in the will of Josiah Key—a tea-merchant who made his pile in China. He came back to

his native town and lived at Canton House, where he died. His fortune is divided between his sister and his nieces and nephews. The mischief is it's one of those reversionary wills. As the legatees die, their shares go to enrich the jack-pot. Winner takes all, including the capital."

"By 'winner,' you mean the ultimate survivor?" asked the Judge.

"I do. And the death-rate in that family is getting more than a coincidence."

The Judge screwed together his wrinkled lids.

"In view of this sudden fall," he remarked, "the last-man-in is likely to finish up himself at eight o'clock in the morning. The inference is that he will reveal his identity with his last murder. Reasoning by the book, he must be guilty. But you will have to *prove* his guilt. He might stage a final crime which is too crafty to be traced to him. Pride, you are not sitting too easy."

"Neither is he," said the Colonel. "Everyone will believe that he wiped out the others when—in reality—he may be damned by a chain of unlucky circumstances. He could be innocent."

"In such a case, I can imagine compensation. With a fortune to spend, he has not got to remain in Oldtown and wilt under local odium."

"Ah, it's plain to see you are neither a gardener nor a small-town man. If you were, you'd know that your hometown is the biggest place in the world, while it's damnably difficult to grow new roots."

The Judge looked across the Square at the hoary houses which appeared to be on the point of toppling down. He

shivered as a gust of wind blew through the cracks of the diamond-paned windows. Too tactful to question the local attraction, he began to chat about the Chief Constable's problem.

"I suppose you suspect the family?" he asked.

"That is definitely the police-angle," replied the Colonel. "The deaths are limited to the legatees of old Key's will and they alone have the motive."

"Any dubious character among them?"

"No, they are all nice people...And they are being killed off one by one."

The Judge hid his astonishment at the anger in his old friend's voice. As though he felt his emotion was out of place, the Colonel began to explain.

"This business reminds me of something which happened when I was a youngster. We had a big tank, filled with minnows, in the conservatory, and we used to go to the canal to net fresh stock. Late one evening I came home in triumph with a unique specimen and dumped him into the tank...In the morning, every fish was dead, floating belly-up on the top of the water. In my ignorance, I had put a killer into the tank—a cray-fish."

The Colonel gave a short laugh as he added, "My mind is as tough as most, but even now, I can't think of that business without a qualm. It was a sort of nursery version of the massacre of Cawnpore. Imagine that devil hunting down his helpless victims all through the night and not letting-up until he had slaughtered the lot...Get me?"

"Not exactly," confessed the Judge. "I'm afraid I can't get enthusiastic about fish."

"But you see the analogy? There's a killer loose in this town, remorselessly hunting down a bunch of helpless people. For instance, take Simone."

He pointed to the fair girl who was returning from her short walk to the pillar-box, and added, "That girl may be the killer. On the other hand, she may be the next victim."

"Certainly it's up to you," said the Judge. "By the way, what about popular opinion?"

"The subject is too delicate to be discussed openly among decent people. But I am told that the mystery has been solved by the ignorant and superstitious element. They say that the murders are committed by the 'Mad Nun.'"

I. — THE MAD NUN

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THE miasma of fear and superstition which created "the mad nun" had been dormant in the atmosphere for months, so that only a murder was needed to release it. It was a poisonous suggestion generated by the combination of a muffled landscape and a body of recluses, known locally as "The Black Nuns."

Oldtown was not especially healthy as it lay low and was ringed too closely by trees which pressed in upon it like the threat of an invading army. In places, the forest appeared actually to have broken-in, for isolated houses were almost hidden by the surrounding foliage. The civic lungs—not designed for deep-breathing—were provided by the bungalows of a new suburb at its eastern end, where its spine of High Street merged into the main road.

There was a secondary road which by-passed the town, following the curve of a sulky brown river and shadowed by the perpetual twilight of fir-woods. This river-road was unlighted and was usually damp underfoot, while its surface was slippery from fallen leaves and fir-needles. Consequently it was neglected in favour of the shorter main road and was popular only with lovers, until they were driven away by the procession of the Black Sisters.

Every evening, as darkness was beginning to fall, a body of dark veiled forms filed singly out of the gates of a large mansion—the Cloisters—at the west end of the town. They wore heavy black habits and high cowls which covered their faces completely—exaggerating their height to unhuman

stature, so that they resembled the creations of a nightmare.

They crossed the main road and descended to the river road—to reappear at the other end of the town. After a short service in the little Roman Catholic chapel, they retraced their steps back to the Cloisters.

The usual number of wild stories was circulated about the recluses. They were credited with the faculty of seeing only at night-time—of living in darkness—of torturing their mental patients. No one had ever seen their faces or heard their voices. None could guess at outlines hidden under shapeless robes...

The Chief Constable—Colonel Pride—had been told some of the truth about the mysterious sisterhood. To begin with, he knew that they were not nuns and belonged to no religious order. Their leader was an anonymous lady and was vouched for by the late Josiah Key, tea-merchant, who had known her in China.

There was no doubt of their wealth, for they not only bought the Cloisters—which had been empty for years because of its uneconomic size—but they reconstructed it to meet their requirements. In these transactions, they were represented by a Miss Gomme, who looked after all their business affairs and acted as a buffer between them and the outside world. She was grey, gaunt and reticent, as though she had been born during a long winter night of frost, and she proved herself a worthy guardian of secrets.

The Chief Constable released some of his information when Inspector Wallace, of the local Police, asked him about the new-comers.

"Have they a racket or are they just cranks?" he queried.

"Neither, I believe," replied Colonel Pride. "They are a body, recluses who believe in the curative properties of darkness. Their official title is 'Sisters of the Healing Darkness.' They run a home for the treatment of severe nervous and borderline cases. They claim never to have had a failure."

"Proves they can afford to pick and choose."

"Yes," agreed the Colonel, "they probably reject a doubtful case. Of course the home is licensed in the usual way. Even if their methods appear unconventional, they get their results."

The Inspector still looked sceptical.

"I don't get it," he complained. "Must they wear those horrible hoods?"

"I have no official knowledge," the Colonel told him. "What do they suggest to you?"

The policeman furrowed his brow before he replied.

"My guess is they wish to keep their identity secret and to scare away Peeping Toms from their privacy. They want to suggest some horror hidden under the veil."

"Your guess is as good as mine," the Colonel remarked.

Before the hideous creation of the Mad Nun began to pick her way through the shadows, the female population of Oldtown had been prepared for her reception by their seasonal scare. This was a story of a man, disguised as a woman, who lurked in lonely roads to molest unprotected girls. The tale had sound entertainment-value at tea-parties, when the day drew in and tea-cups were passed around,

although it was not so popular with a guest who had to walk home alone to an isolated house.

The day when the Mad Nun first appeared, to darken the history of Oldtown, was in October. It was a month before Colonel Pride and the Indian judge stood in the window of the County Club and watched Simone Mornington-Key cross the Square. The horror was put into circulation by a post office clerk, named "Eva." She was a pretty, delicate girl—pale, overgrown and very fair—with heavy-lidded grey eyes. Like most of her companions, she cherished a passion for the new post-mistress—Cassie Thomas.

Upon the morning of the first murder, rays of molten-gold sunshine were striking through the mist as Cassie walked to her work at the new Branch Post Office. Long bedewed cobwebs sparkled as they floated in the air and the trees flamed with autumnal tints. It was not only a day for cheer, but, in addition, Cassie was always happy, so long as she had no cause for grief.

She had got off to a false start—a premature birth which killed her mother. Her childhood had been shadowed by poverty and dependence until she entered the Civil Service as a clerk at the Post Office. It was then that life began for Cassie Thomas. Her first experience of economic freedom brought with it a wonderful gush of personal prestige. Her work was congenial and she considered herself more fortunate than the leisured population of Oldtown, doomed by tradition to slave at games and sports, in all weathers.

Her future was assured by a civil pension. Her modest ambition was gratified by her promotion to the Branch Post

Office...Therefore, she magnified the Lord by singing at her work...

The girls in the outer office liked to hear the low musical croon from Miss Thomas' private room. She was popular with them, especially as her predecessor—a petty tyrant—had not been easy to follow. There was competition to bring flowers for her desk and to carry in her afternoon cup of tea.

That afternoon, Cassie was guilty of the unusual crime of watching the clock. The time seemed to pass slowly because she was looking forward to seeing Mrs. Miniver again, on that popular lady's second visit to the local cinema. When daylight began to fade, she crossed to the window and gazed out at the tree-choked valley.

It was a lonely outlook as the Post Office was built at the extreme east end of the town, to meet the needs of the new bungalow-suburb. Not far away was the tobacconist's shop—a venture of Cassie's cousin—Cherry Ap-Thomas...That "Ap" marked the difference between the relatives. It informed the public that Cherry—who was ten years younger than Cassie—knew her onions and intended to finish with more impressive backing than an official pension...

The only other building was the tiny Roman Catholic chapel—sunken in a damp dock-grown hollow and shaded by sweeping cedars, but Cassie liked the loneliness. It accentuated the beauty of her surroundings and also appealed to a vague Celtic melancholy which underlay her happiness. As she looked out at the dying blaze of foliage, she compared it with a Royal Academy landscape, which was her highest praise. In her turn, she made a pleasant

picture in her olive-green suit and scarlet scarf. Her shining black hair waved naturally and she had the same clear complexion as her cousin, Cherry—only Cherry had organised hers with the rest of her assets.

Miss Thomas fumbled in the pockets of her cardigan and drew out an empty cigarette-carton.

"Blow," she said. "I mustn't forget to drop in at Cherry's and get fags for the pictures."

She was looking forward, not only to meeting Mrs. Miniver, but also the cashier from the Midland Bank. He was a widower and lived at her boarding-house. So once again, she looked at her watch and sighed, while for the first time in her Post Office experience work became a burden.

The copper and gold on the hillside had faded to grey and were beginning to deepen to black, when her favourite clerk—Eva—came into her room. The girl was in an excited and confident mood, for she had beaten the other claimants to Miss Thomas' favour. Her bunch of chrysanthemums stood on the post-mistress' desk and she had brought in the cup of tea with a double ration of biscuits. Therefore she felt justified in her boast to the other clerks.

"I'm going to the pictures with Miss Thomas this evening."

When they had responded with the "raspberry," Eva made a bold attempt to convince them by walking into the private room.

"Is it time to go, Eva?" asked Miss Thomas—hoping that her watch was slow.

"No, Miss Thomas," replied the girl. "The Bats haven't gone by yet."

Although they had Greenwich Time at the Post Office, the clerks always checked it with the Black Sisters' visit to the chapel.

"Bats, Eva?" queried Cassie reprovingly.

"Well, they say they're all mad," said the girl. "Please, Miss Thomas, may I open the window and watch out for them?"

In order to pass the time, Cassie stood beside the girl and stared out also towards the darkness of the river road. Her sight was keen but the very intensity of her gaze blurred the bushes to the semblance of a confused huddle of forms...

And then, suddenly—in defiance of the laws of Nature—the trees began to walk. One by one, they crossed the main road, under the light of the last municipal lamp-post at the east end of the town. Slowly, heavily, inexorably, they seemed to roll past, like images endowed with the mechanism of motion. Without pause or stumble, as though they actually possessed inner vision, they descended the steep slippery path to the chapel.

"Coo," gloated Eva. "They look like the Inquisition going to burn people. They say they torture their poor lunies. When the wind is right, you can hear them yowl."

"Nonsense, Eva," said Miss Thomas. "You only expose your ignorance. They couldn't take mental patients without being open to inspection by the medical officer."

"Everything might look all right when he visited them," hinted Eva darkly. "But what price *after* he'd gone? They tickle their soles."

"Stop talking such nonsense, Eva. They're all good women in their way, even if it is not our way."

"But suppose one of them has gone mad and gets loose —"

As Eva's voice rose, Miss Thomas shut the door, so that the girls in the outer office were cheated of further sensation. She had not been quick enough, however, for a red-haired girl who sat nearest passed on a new version of the current rumour.

"That man who jumps out at girls is really a mad nun."

Conscious that Miss Thomas expected her to go, Eva licked her lips nervously.

"Can I go to the pictures with you, to-night, Miss Thomas?" she asked.

Cassie was never allowed to walk home alone, since she was the victim of her own popularity and too kind-hearted to snub the girls. But although she liked her work and was fond of Eva, she was determined not to take the Post Office with her to the cinema.

"No, Eva," she said firmly, "I am going with a friend. Run and tell the girls to put on their hats."

She used the formal order of dismissal, although no one wore a hat. But Eva still waited.

"Please, Miss Thomas," she pleaded, "won't you let me walk back with you for company? The new road's so dark and they say there's a man dressed up like a woman—"

"That old tale again," interrupted Cassie derisively. "You'd think there were too many women in the town already, without inventing another one...Good-night, Eva."

When Eva returned to the outer office, the other girls were prepared to bait her.

"Coming with us—or waiting for Miss Thomas?" asked the red-head.

"Of course, I am waiting to go with her," said Eva.

The words were scarcely spoken before she regretted her boast. It involved her in the deceit of hiding in the Post Office until she had given her companions sufficient start to out-distance her. With a miserable sense of being deserted, she watched them burst out of the office, laughing and chattering—each eager to resume her private life.

A little later, Cassie came into the outer office and saw Eva standing at the open door. She wore a bright blue tweed coat and a catching silk handkerchief tied over her hair. Excitement and guilt had made her face flame, so that she looked actually beautiful. In Miss Thomas' opinion, she was too attractive to walk home alone, so that she practically drove her through the door.

"Run and catch up with the others," she said sharply, not knowing that the rest of the staff had left five minutes before. "Good night, dear. *Run.*"

"Good night, Miss Thomas. I hope you'll enjoy the pictures," called back Eva as, obediently, she began to run.

It was the first time she had gone home alone, so—although she was used to the darkness—she had no idea of the loneliness of the locality. When she had gone a few yards, she looked back wistfully at the glowing window of the Post Office as though she were leaving a haven. Farther out, swarmed the small lights of Cherry Ap-Thomas' shop,

but no ray filtered through the windows of the Roman Catholic chapel.

"It's like the blasted heath in 'Macbeth'," Eva told herself, although she could not have chosen a more inapt comparison.

Between the Post Office and the new suburb, yawned the empty darkness of a road in the making. Even when she reached the bungalows, they were widely-spaced and stood in gardens, while some were still untenanted. It was such an ideal lurking-place that Eva began to think of horrors. Now that it was too late, she repented having thrown away her chance of safety. Her heart was heavy with a fear of approaching doom and she began to sob with fright.

"I'll be murdered. I *know* I'll be murdered. It's all my own fault. I swanked...I *daren't* go on. I'll go back to my darling precious Miss Thomas. I don't care if she hates me for ever and ever."

She stopped and looked back at the dimmed beacon of the Post Office. Suddenly she saw a black shape move across the glowing screen of the windows. Whatever stood there was too far away for recognition, but at the sight of it, her heart leaped with terror.

She realised that it blocked her way back to sanctuary. If she went forward, she would meet it. If she fled, it would overtake her. She had no hope of escape. It was Doom.

With a shriek of despair she began to run wildly through the blackness of no-man's land, towards the new suburb. Straining her ears, she thought she heard sounds behind her—a pitiless beat of footsteps in pursuit.

She forced her pace and ran faster...Faster...

II. — HOW THEY BROUGHT THE GOOD NEWS

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LESS than ten minutes afterwards, the body of the victim was discovered by the owner of one of the new bungalows. He acted promptly—using the Post Office telephone to ring up the Police—so the hunt was out without loss of time. As nearest the scene of the crime, the first place to be visited was the tobacconist's. It was merely a two-roomed lock-up erection of red brick, but its modesty was contradicted by an illuminated sign, advertising "AP-THOMAS & APPLEBY" in flaming red letters.

Not long before the police-constable entered, shouts of laughter floated through the open door, to mark the conclusion of a successful business deal on either side of the counter. The commercial traveller from whom Appleby bought his stock was paying his periodical visit which was always a social occasion. Business completed, it was up to the parties concerned to prove themselves good mixers by swapping dirty stories over drinks.

Although they were not alike, the same description would cover both Cherry's partner—Appleby—and the traveller—"Our Mr. Macturk." They were keen-eyed, tight-lipped and smartly dressed; their hair was growing thin in the same place and shone with setting-cream.

In spite of the bawdy atmosphere, Cherry Ap-Thomas—late Science mistress in a girls' college—more than held her own. Having contributed a biological limerick, she watched the effect of her smut with the scornful detachment of a

spiteful woman who sets her chimney on fire to spoil her neighbour's wash.

Had Cherry been backed with social prestige, she might have been the local beauty, instead of Simone. Her colouring was more vivid and her figure better developed. Moreover her face was expressive of strong character, due partly from her slight frown of concentration—a legacy of her teaching years. She wore a tight black suit which enhanced the brilliance of her ginger hair and her hazel eyes. Her lips rarely betrayed her emotions since she chewed gum habitually, as a preventive to over-smoking.

The commercial traveller—who had heard the limerick before—gave a convincing imitation of a hearty laugh before he cut off the power.

"I've been hearing about old Key's will, to-day," he said, speaking to Cherry with assumed familiarity, to hide his respect. "I had no idea you were so well worth knowing. I'm going to cultivate you."

"Nothing doing there, Macturk," Appleby told him. "You'd find her all stone and precious little cherry."

Cherry chewed her gum to hide the bitter twist of her lips.

"Here's my story," she said. "I and my two cousins, Julian and Cassie, were all left orphans when we were very young. We committed the crime of being poor relations without any relations to sponge on. Good old Josiah Key was only related to us through his wife, but he stumped up for our education...After I'd met my partner in a newspaper, among the small 'ads'"—Cherry smiled at Appleby—"old Miss Key—Josiah's sister—had the blasted cheek to write me a letter of

protest. She said I'd wasted her brother's money and gone to Bedford College on false pretences...Now, boys, does that explain the stone?"

"But is it true you have a share in his will?" persisted the traveller.

"Yes, with eight other legatees," replied Cherry. "The sister, Miss Key, has half; the other half is divided between the old boy's own relatives and his wife's family. That's the Thomas clan—Julian, Cassie and myself."

"How many Keys?"

"What's this?" Cherry's voice rasped. "Are you taking a census? For the record, there are four Keys. There are the twins—Gertrude and Gabriel. They live at Clock Cottage and Gertrude is very manly...Then there's Simone Mornington-Key and her step-brother, Dr. Shackleton Key. He's one of those handsome brutes, all shoulders and chin. Married with an infant son."

"That makes eight legatees," remarked the traveller.

"But we're nine. There's a Mrs. Aurelius, wife of a scientist. She used to live in Josiah's pocket. He was a tea-merchant in China and she appears to have been the sugar in his tea...Also for your information, we only draw interest on the capital, which averages three per cent. in trustee stock. So we are all waiting hopefully for some mysterious epidemic which can wipe out a family in one go. We—"

She broke off as a police-constable—heated from running—burst into the shop.

"Has any stranger been round?" he panted. "There's been a murder near here."

Cherry's natural colour faded under her rouge, but, after the fashion of Charlotte—who "went on cutting bread-and-butter"—she continued to chew her gum as she listened to the constable's news. She left the men to express their horror and to comment on the shocking nature of the crime. When at last she spoke, it was to ask a question.

"Have you any idea who did it?"

"We shall know soon," prophesied the man. "He can't have got far." He turned to Appleby and asked, "How long have you been here?"

"The best part of an hour," replied Appleby. "We've been checking up on stock with our traveller—Mr. Macturk."

"All three?"

"Yes."

"Hear a scream or any unusual sound?"

"Afraid we were making too much noise. We're all very good friends."

"Any customers?"

"Naturally." Like Cherry, Appleby knew his onions and never missed a chance to advertise. "I shouldn't think five minutes passes here without a customer. Miss Ap-Thomas attended to the counter. You didn't serve any stranger, did you, Miss Ap-Thomas?"

"No," replied Cherry, "they were all regulars. I'll write down their names and addresses, so that the Sergeant"—she promoted him, according to convention—"can check up on them."

Her steady hand was proof of good nerves as she scribbled rapidly but legibly on a slip.

"Cool customer," reflected the constable as he crossed to the inner door.

"Where does this lead to?" he asked.

"The living-room," explained Appleby. "It has a cooking-stove and wash-place and we also store stock there. No one sleeps on the premises. But if anyone was hiding there, we'd have seen him go through the shop."

"I'll have a look round," said the policeman.

After he had satisfied himself that no criminal was concealed on the premises, the constable gave Appleby a piece of advice.

"Anyone could get in through the window of the inner room. You want screws put in. This is a lonely place for a lady. Better be sure than sorry."

The commercial traveller waited until the policeman's footsteps were fading in the distance, before he winked at Cherry.

"If anyone could get in through that window, anyone could get out," he hinted. "But I don't believe in telling the police everything."

"Such as?" asked Cherry.

"Such as the chronic time you took washing your hands."

"Fool."

The contempt in Cherry's voice withered any further attempt at humour as she walked to the telephone.

"This is hot news," she said. "My cousin Julian might like to be first to circulate it. Makes him appear in the know."

"Keen on him?" asked her partner jealously.

"I should be, if he were not my first cousin. Actually I never knew him until I asked him to draw up our deed of

partnership. He disappointed me when he charged me the same as a stranger but he was worth it. He thought up every dirty trick one partner can play another and then he guarded against it."

She dialled her cousin's number and spoke rapidly to the typist who took the call.

"Cherry Ap-Thomas here, Miss Davis. Tell Mr. Thomas I wish to speak to him urgently."

Covering the receiver with her hand, she turned round and spoke to the men with a bitter note in her voice.

"This reminds me of the poem we all learned in school. 'How they brought the good news from Ghent to Aix.'"

Like Cherry, Julian Thomas, solicitor, concealed his feelings when he heard the news of the crime. He was careful to make only brief comments which could convey no information to his typist. She was working late to finish copying a contract and he knew that a hint of the tragedy would play havoc with her spelling.

In appearance, he resembled neither of his cousins. He was pale, thin and dark and spoke in a languid voice which conveyed a misleading impression of his character. In reality, he was both clever and ambitious, with an inflexible will concealed under his quiet manner.

He had taken some hard knocks when he dared to put up his plate in a town where practices descended from father to son. In a comparatively short time, however, he was respected as a professional rival, as well as being accepted socially. Recently he had become fairly friendly with the Keys since he did the legal work in connection with Josiah Key's will.

At the moment, he responded to the thrill which accompanies exclusive knowledge. Murder was almost unknown in Oldtown, except for an occasional fatal domestic fight which practically amounted to super-violent family-affairs. He was uncertain whether to broadcast it immediately or to keep it for someone whose interest he wished to hold.

"I'm going out, Miss Davis," he told his typist. "You needn't wait for me to come back. Put the contracts on my desk for me to sign and I'll post them myself."

His office was in the oldest part of the town—a twisting cobbled lane, too narrow for traffic. Its ancient tottering buildings were rat-riddled and the oaken doors white with age; but in spite of the prevailing odour of dry-rot, each displayed its professional brass plate—together with the date of its erection—to testify to the civic pride in Lawyers Lane.

When Julian reached the Square, the small crowd coming out of the cinema told him that the afternoon performance of "Mrs. Miniver" was just over. A gleam came into his eyes as he recognised Simone Mornington-Key, for he was conscious of her beauty. She was accompanied by her mother and her step-brother's wife, commonly known as "Mrs. Shackleton."

Mrs. Mornington-Key was the generous donor who had supplemented the "Key" title with her maiden name of "Mornington." She was a large, blonde lady—full-moon to Simone's crescent. As she adored her daughter, it was significant that Simone did not resent the fact that she

concentrated her attention on her daughter-in-law by marriage.

Mrs. Shackleton was a testimony to the spirit of snobbery in a small traditional town. She had neither brains, beauty nor wealth, yet homage was paid to her because of her remote connection with an exalted family. In appearance, she had a flat, round rosy face and light-blue eyes. She wore a grey squirrel coat and—to give her her due—she looked clean.

Julian glanced at her critically before he gazed with admiration at Simone's delicately tinted face and the sweep of her darkened lashes.

"I haven't seen you for centuries, Julius," she said. "Come back with us for a drink."

Although he was pleased by the invitation, he noticed that she had not troubled to memorise his Christian name.

"Yes, do come," urged Mrs. Mornington-Key. "We're due for a bracer. We feel all emotional. We've been seeing 'Mrs. Miniver' again. Isn't Greer Garson enchanting?"

"She reminded me of Rosalie," said Simone, paying homage to her sister-in-law. "Not face exactly—but something. An impression, you know. I always catch those."

"How clever of you, Simone darling," cried her mother. "Now you point it out, I can see the hidden likeness. And don't you think Julian is rather like Walter Pidgeon?"

Impatient with such futility, Julian decided they could stand a shock of reality.

"There is not the slightest resemblance in either case," he said. "Sorry, Mrs. Shackleton, but I should never ask you