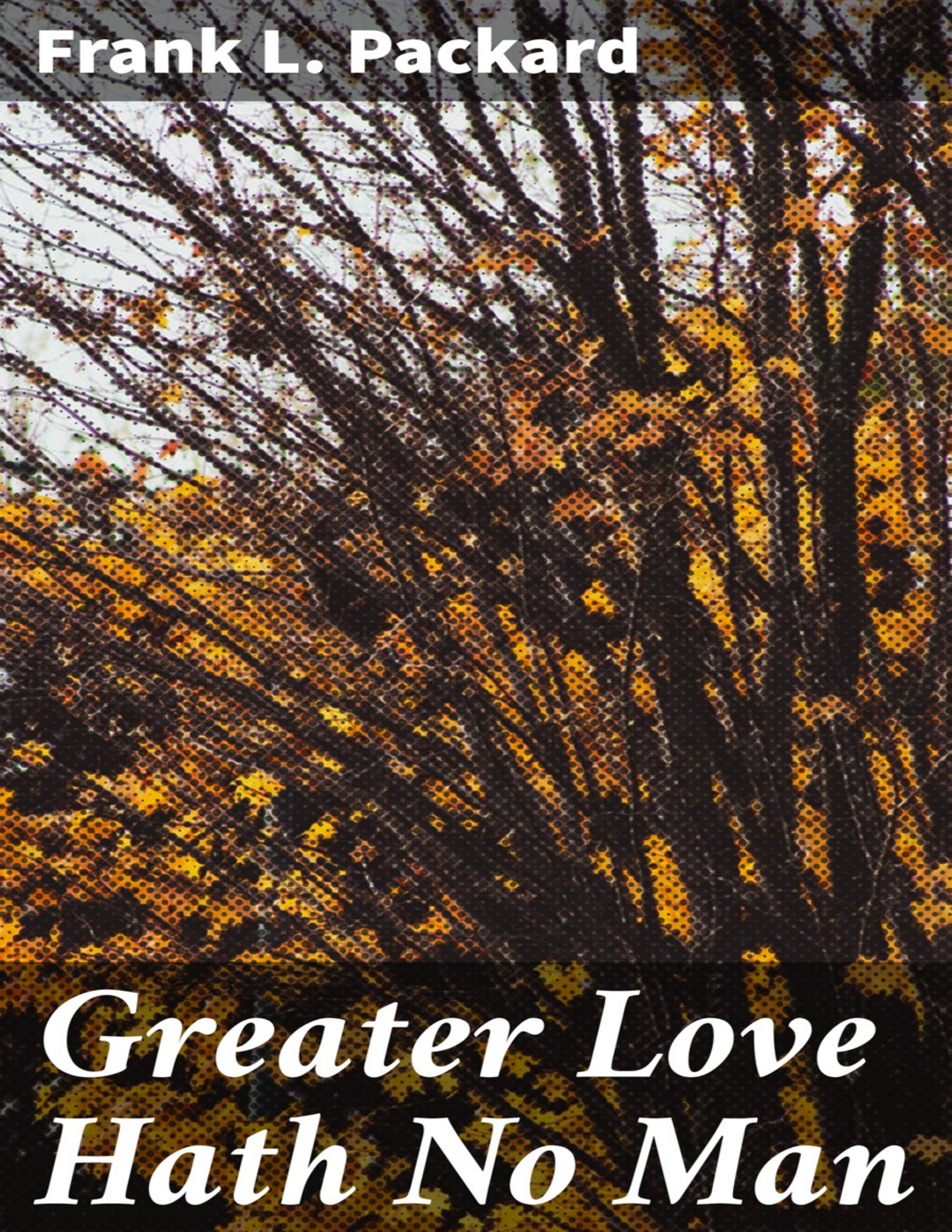
Frank L. Packard

Greater Love Hath No Man



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Greater Love Hath No Man

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Chapter 1
The Darkest Hour Of Night

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UTTER stillness. Utter blackness. And then a faint, indeterminate, far-away sound. The sleeper's eyes opened, and, as calmly, as naturally as he had lain asleep, he lay now alert. There was neither alarm nor shock in the transition. There had been a sound foreign to the serene silence of the peaceful, sleeping household; a sound too low to rouse a slumberer from repose by its mere *volume*, too low almost to be *heard;* a sound so low as to obtrude itself only upon the most super-sensitive sub-consciousness—Varge lay awake.

And now it came again. Then a long pause—then again—and again. It came from the east end of the house, at the rear—from the back stairs. Some one was mounting them with extreme caution—a prolonged wait between each step, one foot following the other only after the body's weight had been gradually, very gradually, thrown upon the first, lest the bare wood stairs should creak—creak out the secret confided to them in this small, silent hour of morning.

It was black—dense black. Once the step stumbled slightly and there was a soft rubbing sound, barely audible, as of a hand thrown out to feel the way against the wall.

The minutes passed, perhaps three of them. The footsteps now had reached the landing and had begun to come along the hall—nearer and nearer, with the same ominous stealth, to the door of the room in which Varge lay.

Still relaxed, still in repose, not a muscle of Varge's body had flexed by so much as a ripple as he listened; the beat of his pulse was the same calm, strong, even beat as in sleep. And yet every faculty was atune, stimulated to its highest efficiency. What brought Harold Merton, the son of the house, at two o'clock in the morning to the little chamber over the kitchen, that was apart, shut off, from the rest of the dwelling; and brought him stealing there, where none could hear or mark his movements, like some guilty, evil prowler with cautious, frightened tread?

A hand fumbled for the doorknob outside with a curious sound, as though the knuckles were beating a tremulous, involuntary tattoo upon the door as they came into contact with it. The knob turned, the door was pushed slowly inwards, slowly closed again, there was a faint click from the released catch—and against the door, without form or outline in the darkness, was an added opaqueness.

"I am awake"—there was an almost imperceptible pause between Varge's words as he spoke, comparable somewhat to one building the phrase of a strange language one word upon the other, but comparable only in that regard—the pronunciation held no trace of foreign accent. "I am awake"—his tones were quiet, composed. "Why have you come to me in my room in this way, Harold?"

A low gasp, the sharp-drawn intake of a breath, came from the door.

"You—you know that it is I,"—the words were a hoarse, shaken whisper.

"I heard your first step on the stairs," Varge answered simply. "I heard you come up each stair. I heard you stumble

once and feel along the wall. I heard you come down the hall on tiptoe. I know your step. I heard your hand shake like a frightened man's against the door."

"Sometimes"—the other seemed to shiver as he spoke—"you seem more than *human*."

"Why have you come to me in my room at this hour?" asked Varge again, rising now to a sitting posture in the bed. "What has happened? I will light a candle and you will tell me."

"*No!* In God's name no light"—Merton's words, low-breathed, came with frenzied quickness, quavering, dominant with terror. "No light; and, for mercy's sake, speak low. Speak very low. Wait! I am coming close to you where I can whisper."

Varge made no answer. His eyes were on that darker spot that, once by the door, now was moving across the room toward him. And then a hand, thrust out, groping, touched his shoulder—it was wet with cold moisture and shook as with the ague.

"Varge, you must help me," Merton burst out hysterically. "I am in danger, Varge—in awful danger, do you hear? You can save me. You are the only man, *the only man*, who can. For God's sake say you will! It can't mean anything to you—-there's nothing you can lose—you don't even know who you are—you haven't even so much as a name, except what we've always called you—Varge. You'll help me, Varge—say you will! We've brought you up all these years and treated you like—like one of us, and all you've had and all you've got you owe to us. You'll—you'll repay it now, Varge, won't you?"

The blackness of the room was gone, transformed into quick, shifting scenes and pictures that staged themselves in the little chamber before Varge's mind—colourful, vivid, real—pictures of childhood, memory-dimmed; pictures of boyhood, standing out more sharply, in clearer focus; pictures of later years; pictures of yesterday. The years passed in lightning sequence before him. A foundling, nameless, a child of five, adopted from an orphan asylum, here he had been given a home; here he and this man beside him had been brought up together in the little country town, until the other had gone out to college and he, his own common school education finished, had begun to work for Doctor Merton, his benefactor; here he had grown to manhood, he was twenty-five now; here he had spent his life, knowing almost a father's consideration, almost a mother's care, which in turn had kindled a love and gratitude in his own heart that had grown almost to worship with the years, a gratitude and loyalty that had caused him to crush back longings for a wider sphere—contenting himself meanwhile by constant study, acquiring in a hard school the knowledge of medicine that one day, when these two should be gone, he meant to make his profession—for Harold Merton, ten years his senior, was little at home now, and they, growing old, had come to lean intimately upon him, to depend on him, to need him. And so he had lived on there—as Varge, the doctor's man.

"It is true," he said slowly. "You had no need to tell me so. It is true. I owe everything to your father, to your mother, and through them to you. I will do anything for your sakes."

“Yes, yes; I told myself you would,” Merton babbled wildly. “I knew you would. You promise, Varge? Give me your promise. You’ve never broken one.”

“I will do anything for your sakes,” Varge repeated quietly. “I could not do anything else.”

“Then, get up,” urged Merton feverishly. “Get up quickly and dress. I have brought money enough to take you anywhere—you can get away where they will never find you. Hurry, Varge, hurry! Why don’t you hurry? You have promised, Varge.”

Varge’s hands went out and rested in reassuring pressure on Merton’s two shoulders.

“I have promised, Harold,” he said gravely; “and I will do this thing whatever it may be, I will go anywhere if it is necessary—but you are talking wildly, you are not calm. You imagine something that is worse than the thing is. What is this danger that my going will save you from, and how could my leaving here save you from anything?”

“I have been seen,” Merton muttered hoarsely. “*I have been seen*,” he repeated, with a shudder. “They will know that I did it unless suspicion is directed somewhere else. Don’t you see? Are you blind? If you fly in the night, if you disappear, they will think it was you. But they’ll never catch you, you are too clever, and you’ve nothing to lose, no family, no name even—you see, I thought of that. I’ll give you plenty of money. Hurry, Varge! Get up and get your clothes on! Don’t make a noise, not a sound!”

“What is this thing that you have done that I must take upon myself?” Varge’s hands tightened imperatively on the

other’s shoulders. “What is this thing that you are afraid of?”

“Father,” Merton mumbled. “Father. Father—and he is dead.”

“Your father—dead!” Varge pulled the shaking form toward him, as though to search and read the other’s features even in the darkness. “When did he die?”

“A—a few minutes—great God, a *year* ago”—the words were a chattering, fearsome whisper. “In the library. We had a quarrel. I—I struck him with the fender bar. *I have killed my father*.”

Chapter 2
“I Am Varge”

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CLOSE, Varge had drawn the other to him, and the breath of one was upon the other’s cheek. For a moment, that seemed to span eternity in that little chamber, the two forms on the bed held rigid, motionless—and again there had fallen an utter stillness, a silence as of death, a silence in grim harmony now with the black shadow, blacker than the shadow of the night, that lay upon the house.

As a sudden knife gash shocks veins and arteries into inertia for a brief moment before the blood spurts madly from the wound; so, for that moment, Varge’s faculties were shocked to numbness at the other’s words. Then his fingers on Merton’s shoulders shut vise-like. Horror, loathing of the awful deed revolted him; the inhuman selfishness that had tricked and played upon his gratitude, demanding that he should take this hideous crime upon himself, swept him with seething passion—and only the mighty will power, the self-centred grip of the man upon himself, kept back his fingers from flying at the other’s throat to wring the breath from the shaking thing that shivered now in his grasp.

No words passed his lips—tighter his fingers closed. Straight out before him he held Merton—and the blackness between them, cloaking their faces, grew tenser charged as the seconds passed, until it seemed to live, to palpitate, to move and throb and breathe out dread, soundless words.

“Varge! *Varge!*”—the words gurgled in choking terror from Merton’s lips. “Why are you holding me like this? Let

me go; let me go, I tell you!”

“I said I would do this thing”—Varge spoke in a low, deadly monotone. “But I will *not* do it. For your father’s sake and your mother’s sake, I said I would do anything—”

Merton was battling now wildly, striking out frenzied, aimless blows; mad with a new fear, a physical fear, of Varge; struggling, squirming to free himself. Varge’s body swayed not by so much as the fraction of an inch. His arms, like great steel rods, were motionless. It was as though he held, without thought of effort or exertion, some inanimate, paltry object in his grasp.

“—I will *not* do this thing”—Varge still spoke on, still in the same dull monotone. “What right have you to ask it, you blood-guilty son? What right have you to life that you ask my life for your life? I have no name, you say, to make a curse of—I have nothing to lose, you say, because I do not know who I am. I? *I am Varge.* You think that I have no soul, no conscience, that the foulest crime in God’s sight means nothing to me—because I am a *nobody!*”

A faint, purling sound came from Merton. He had ceased to struggle. No hurt nor blow had Varge given him; but the cold fury of the man who held him, the fearful power of the grip upon him, that all his own strength would not avail to shake by one iota, seemed to have sunk into his soul and left him swaying sick with terror.

“Save *you!*”—Varge, like an outraged judge, was summing up his terrible arraignment. “Save you from the punishment of a crime too awful to speak aloud! Save you because I owe *gratitude* to the one whose life an inhuman

son has taken! It would be better to end it here myself than to let you escape. It would be better to end—”

Slowly, very slowly, Varge’s fingers relaxed—slowly, as though some unseen power, stronger than himself, plucked them one by one from the hold to which they clung, lingering, reluctant to let go. A limp thing dropped from his grasp and fell across the bed. And slowly, very slowly, Varge’s hands crept through the darkness and clasped themselves over his own temples.

It came shadowy at first, as though just beyond the range of mental vision, eluding it; it came then gradually more and more distinct, as if folds of some gauzy texture—each fold transparent in itself, the whole but a misty covering that no more than blurred the object that it veiled—were being drawn aside one after the other. And now he saw clearly. Breathing, living, pulsing life, a picture, hallowed, softened, from the brush of the Master Painter was lifted up to his gaze—the silvered hair, with its old-lace cap, smoothly parted across the fair, white brow; the tiny furrows in the skin, scarcely discernible, as though age, regretful of its part to touch at all, had touched with gentle, reverent hand; the grey eyes, soft and tender, looking into his, full of trust, pure, serene, calm; the lips, half-parted, smiling at him with the loving, happy smile he knew so well—the face, full of sweet dignity, was the face of her who had taken a mother’s place in his life, whom he had come to reverence and love, as he realised he would have reverenced and loved his own mother had he ever known her—the face of Mrs. Merton.

The fine-poised, agile brain of the man, full of simple majesty that obtruded neither thought of self nor doubt of consequence, leaped in a lightning flash from premise to conclusion. Grief and sorrow that would bow the grey head down, anguish that would break the tender heart, he could not save her from; he could not bring back to life the form, already cold, she loved so well. But from this other thing, this awful thing, that would strike at her very reason, shatter her faith in the existence of her God, outrage her mother love to hideous mockery and drag her gentle soul in shuddering torture to her grave, crush from her life all that in life was left to her, love, comfort, hope, trust—the great heart of Varge welled with the love he bore her—this thing she should never know, this thing should never touch her.

Merton lay across his feet. He pushed the other away, got out of bed and for a moment stood by the open window motionless. The still, cold air of the winter night was grateful, thin-clad though he was. Not a sound broke the silence from without. Everywhere the snow, under a black, starless sky, lay white-mantling the ground—whiter, it seemed somehow, than he had ever seen it before. Across the river, lower down in a hollow, lay the town, two miles away. Scarce more than pin-points, two or three lights, twinkling faintly, indicated its position. A moment he stood there, then feeling his way to the chair beside the little washstand over which his clothes, as usual, had been carefully folded, he began to dress in the darkness. A light to *him* now was abhorrent—he dared not even trust himself to look on the other’s face.

A rustle came from the bed. Merton, evidently judging that Varge's actions were the result of some decision relative to himself, had started up in an accession of terrified apprehension.

"Varge," he mumbled huskily. "Varge, what—what are you going to do?"

As though voicing his thoughts aloud unconsciously, rather than in answer to another, Varge spoke in a low, concentrated way.

"I will do it. It is I who have killed Doctor Merton."

It was as if it crept upon Merton slowly. An instant he held silent, still. Then came reaction. A mad paroxysm of relief seemed to sweep the coward soul, he sat upright and struggled to the edge of the bed, babbling, whispering, incoherent almost in his craven transport.

"You will, eh?—yes, you'll do it, Varge. I've money enough to begin with—and I can get more. You'll do it after all, eh? Yes; I knew you would. I knew you'd stand by me. I knew you wouldn't fail me, Varge; we've been good friends you and I, and—" The words froze on Merton's lips. Varge had crossed to the bed, his hand had reached out through the darkness, closed on Merton's leg just above the knee and tightened with the same crushing grip that before had stricken the man with terror.

"Can you not *understand?*"—Varge's whisper came now hoarse and tense. "Do not speak, except to answer my questions—I am afraid of myself with the thought of saving *you*. You were seen, you said. How were you seen so that the crime would point to you and yet would be of no proof against you if suspicion were turned upon some one else?"

“Varge, let go!” Merton cried faintly. “For God’s sake, let go—you are breaking my leg!”

With a curious movement, as one suddenly releases his hold upon an object he has unwittingly, unconsciously grasped, which to the sense of touch is utterly repugnant, Varge drew away his hand.

“Answer my question,” he said. “If you have been seen at all, there cannot be much time to spare.”

“No, no; there is not much—there’s not a moment to lose”—this phase, not new, but for a while dormant through other terrors and now awakened again, brought the words in pitiful eagerness from Merton’s lips. “I’ll tell you everything—everything. Listen. I got into trouble in New York a little while ago—serious trouble. There was a woman in it. I thought it was all hushed up. The day after I came down here for a visit last week I received a letter—and the whole cursed business was in it. I lost the letter, Varge. Father found it, and without saying anything to me investigated the whole thing. To-night he called me into the library after mother had gone to bed—he said he hadn’t dared to tell her anything. He opened one of the little square cupboards in the wall at the side of the fireplace, you know the one, the one on the right hand side, where he keeps his books, papers and money, and took out the letter with a lot of others he had received about it and showed them to me. He was in a fearful rage. We quarrelled. But there was no noise—we were afraid of awakening mother. Then I don’t know just what happened. I was standing by the fire poking it with that long fender bar. I think he meant to snatch it from my hand, just with angry impetuosity. We struggled and—it

wasn’t cold blood, Varge. We—we’d been quarrelling. I didn’t know what I did. I struck him on the side of the head with the bar and he—he fell.”

Merton paused, and in the silence came the sound as of hands hard-wrung together till the finger joints crackled.

Varge moved away from the bed, back to the little washstand and resumed his dressing.

“Go on,” he said.

“I tore up the letters and burned them in the grate”—Merton’s voice was a low moan now. “And then, I don’t know why, I went to the window and drew up the blind, and looked out onto the lawn. It was all snow, white, white, white, and not a mark in it. I was trying to think what to do, when I heard a sound back of me from where—where It lay. It startled me and turned my blood cold. I whirled around and jumped back across the room, and—and bent over father before I realised what had made the noise. It was only a piece of coal falling in the grate, only a piece—” Merton broke off jerkily, and a short, sobbing laugh of hysteria came from him.

“Go on,” said Varge again.

“I—I bent over father then. I—I was cool again. The thought came to me that he might be only stunned—but, but he was dead. I was perhaps three minutes, perhaps longer, I don’t know how long, bending over him, and then I looked up—*there was a face pressed close against the window pane and the eyes were glaring in at me*. Something held me still—I couldn’t move. I must have taken my eyes away instantly, so I am sure he didn’t know I saw him. When I looked again the face was gone. Then I got up, it seemed

at once, though I suppose it must have been another minute, and went to the window. There was no one in sight, but there were footprints in the snow and the trees hid the road. I jerked down the blind, and then—and then—I thought of you. I turned off the light, crept out of the room and stole up here. I wanted to get you to run away—it was my only chance. I wanted to get you to run away, to make them think you did it, and I—I had a story all ready to tell that would account for my being seen in the room as I was. I would say that I had been reading late upstairs and heard your voice and father's in the library; then silence. That I had kept on reading, and after a while, wondering why father hadn't come up to bed, I went downstairs softly so as not to awaken mother and found him dead—and that then I went for you and you had disappeared. It was Mart Robson's face at the window—he's never liked me anyhow. I suppose the MacGregors must have sent him from the farm for a doctor, and he saw the light and instead of ringing the bell and waking up the house he went first to the window. I know what he's done now—he's gone on to the town to tell the sheriff what he's seen. Varge, do you hear, he's on his way there now!"

Varge's mind was working quickly—mapping, planning out his course of action—weaving the finer threads of detail into the web that was to enmesh himself and free the other. His coat was on now, and he turned to face Merton through the darkness. It was all clear, all plain, even to that one thing that had troubled him—to lessen, to soften the shock to *her*.

“Listen,” he said. “I am dressed. I am going. You must make no mistake now. You should not have turned off the light nor drawn down the shade again—*you did not do either*—I will attend to them. You did not see any one at the window. For the rest, you can tell your story as you intended—but there are two things you must do. First, you must telephone the sheriff; if you cannot get him, do not waste time over it—you must have *tried*, that is the important thing. Then you must go at once for Mrs. MacLaughlin, your mother’s friend, and bring her back here before Mrs. Merton is awakened—that should not take you more than fifteen minutes, and you must not be longer. When you come back, go into that room again and fix each detail *as you find it then* in your mind, and be careful that your story agrees in every particular. Do you understand?”

“Yes, yes”—Merton struggled from the bed to his feet—“I will telephone at once, and then—”

“Wait,” said Varge sharply. “Two of us on the stairs at once may make a noise. Wait until I have gone down.” He moved across the room, felt for the door and opened it.

“Yes; but, Varge, money”—Merton was whispering wildly—“you can’t get away without money, and everything depends on your getting away, you’ve got to get away—here, take—”

“I shall have no need of money,” Varge answered, as he stepped out into the passage.

Chapter 3
In Which The Web Is Woven

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SWIFTLY, with sure, light, noiseless tread, Varge made his way along the short passage and down the stairs. It was a fight now with and against time—with it, physically, to accomplish what must be done without the loss of a moment; and, still more important, against it mentally, to coordinate the discrepancy that already existed.

Robson, MacGregor's farmhand, could have done but one of two things—gone on to town, or to the nearest neighbour. Varge's mind had already weighed the alternatives—and, discarding one, agreed with Harold Merton. He had known Robson all his life—Robson was of that type, illiterate, sensational, full of cheap bluster, to whom notoriety would be as the breath of life—he would lose none of the importance attaching to the discovery of a crime, none of the opportunity of being the central figure in the affair by sharing his discovery with any one, who, later on, participating in the furor and excitement, would detract from his own prominence—Robson would tell his tale to the authorities and to no one else. Any feeling Robson might have against Harold Merton; the fact that in all probability he was seeking medical assistance and the other doctors lived in the town itself, which would have an added tendency to take him there; the fact that no one had as yet come, as might have been the case had Robson stopped at the next house, though there was still time for that yet—all these were extraneous considerations to Varge. It was on

the man’s temperament, an intimate appraisal of the man himself, as Varge appraised all men with whom he came in contact, that his conclusion was based.

The roads were heavy. There had been a fall of snow during the previous afternoon and evening. Robson could not cover the two miles to the town at best under twenty minutes. It would take him some time to arouse the sheriff, for the sheriff to dress, hear the story, secure a deputy perhaps, and start back—just how long it was impossible to judge specifically; it might be half an hour, or twice that. Then there was the return trip. In all, at the closest calculation, not less than an hour. Debited against this was the time that had elapsed since Robson had looked in at the window; say, five minutes for Merton to creep upstairs, and then the scene in the little chamber—how long had that been? What was the difference between the seemingly limitless time that it had occupied and reality? Varge’s mind, eliminating impression, with lightning rapidity rehearsed every act that had taken place, every word that had been spoken—fifteen minutes, it could not have been more. And fifteen and five were twenty. It would be another half-hour, then, before the sheriff would start back.

Varge had reached the bottom of the stairs now and crossed the kitchen. Between the kitchen and the front hall was a small crockery pantry from which swinging doors led, one to the dining room directly in the rear of the library, and one to the hall itself. As he entered the pantry, Varge took his knife from his pocket and felt along the wall with his hand. An instant’s groping and his fingers touched the telephone receiver, followed it down to the base of the

instrument, and then, stooping, he slipped his knifeblade in between the wires and the wall and severed the connection.

He straightened up and listened. From the rear above him, he could hear Harold Merton's step at the top of the stairs—then the door at Varge's right swung under his hand, and he went quickly along the hall past the dining room to the library door. There was no flurry, no excitement in his movements—every action, swift, rapid though it was, was one of deliberate precision. With his hand on the library doorknob, just opposite the foot of the front staircase, he paused for an instant to listen again. And now there was not a sound—either Mrs. Merton nor Anna, the old maid-servant, had been disturbed. Varge's lips drew together in hard compression, the knob turned silently, he pushed the door open, stepped over the threshold and closed it again behind him.

A faint red glow from the grate fire at the lower end of the room and directly opposite the low window that gave onto the lawn in front, rather than illuminating, seemed, by contrast, to accentuate the darkness of the apartment in all but the little, shifting, flickering space around the fireplace itself. On this space Varge's eyes had fastened instantly. A form with arms outflung lay upon the great bear-skin rug before the hearth, silent, motionless; the face was turned toward the fire, and the light, as though in grim defiance of death, tinging the cheek with its own rich, deep colour, gave to the features the appearance of the rosy hue of health. It was as if the man had thrown himself down to rest and relaxation, to watch the firelight's play—and had fallen asleep. Poor, pitiful illusion that could last no longer than to

enhance the stern awfulness of reality! From the temple upwards across the thick, white hair was a deep open wound, and below it the hair itself was dark and matted; while a little trickling stream of something red, a red deeper even than the glowing coals, still ran down, but very slowly now, behind the ear, and as though to hide itself and its telltale story, disappeared beneath the dead man's collar.

At the Doctor's feet lay the fender bar—a long piece of stout, square, wrought iron, some four feet in length, drawn to rough, ornamental javelin points at the ends. And that it, fashioned once by kindly hands, should be the instrument of death, seemed to Varge, as his eye fell upon it, to lend a curiously mingled touch of pathos and irony to the scene. He remembered the day, a day last summer, the Doctor's birthday, when Joe Malloch, the blacksmith, had brought the gift to the house. The Doctor had been away, and he had helped Joe to set it up before the grate—two small iron pedestals, cleverly forged to represent little mediæval towers, and the bar to rest between them. He remembered the old Doctor's surprise and keen delight when he had seen them. One of the pedestals, knocked over, lay now on its side against the inner edge of the hearth.

A sudden, low, choking sound, like a strong man's stiffled sob, came from Varge's lips as he stepped across the room, and, on his knees between the fire and Doctor Merton, knelt for a moment over the other's body.

Against the fire, Varge's form loomed up for an instant, throwing into relief a figure well above medium height, but whose proportions were hidden by a heavy overcoat buttoned to the neck. A fur cap, pulled close over the

forehead and ears, was on his head. His face was completely in shadow, but as he turned now quickly and, rising, picked up the fender bar, there was a momentary gleam of dark eyes—and the eyes were splashed and wet.

The fireplace, wide, old-fashioned, built of brick, jutted out into the room, leaving a space barely more than five feet on each side between it and the walls; and here, on either side, just in the middle of this space and at the height of a man's shoulders—where the wainscoting ended—were the small cupboards, some two feet square, that Harold Merton had spoken of. They had been built originally with glass doors for Mrs. Merton's best china in the old days when she had presided there over her afternoon tea-service, but, with the years, the Doctor had come to appropriate the room as library, study and consultation room, and the glass doors had been replaced with stout wooden ones—and the china by the Doctor's cash-box, account books and papers.

Varge stepped at once past the fireplace to the right hand side and felt out with his hand. The cupboard door was still wide open, the key still in the lock; inside, his fingers closed on the metal cash-box. This he took out, closed and locked the door, and abstracted the key from the lock. He turned back for a moment now to where Doctor Merton lay, placed the cash-box on the rug and slipped the key into the Doctor's pocket.

Another instant, and he returned to the cupboard. He raised the fender bar across the door, his hands moved along it as though measuring—and then he stood motionless, listening. From the pantry, behind the dining room, came the muffled ringing of the telephone, very low,

very indistinct, as though a hand were held over the bells to deaden the sound. Harold Merton was trying to get a connection. Again and again Merton rang, and Varge waited. The seconds were flying by. It had been necessary to destroy the connection to account for Merton's otherwise suspicious tardiness in communicating with the authorities, and he had refrained from telling the other what he had intended to do in the hope of instilling into the nerve-shaken, incoherent man a little confidence on finding a grain of *truth* in the story he was to tell—that he had *tried* to get connection and couldn't; and, also, there would be, perhaps even more important, the very evident *genuineness* of Merton's surprise when some one else should call his attention to the cut wires. But he had told Merton to waste no time. Would the man never—the ringing stopped, a guarded step came down the hall, passed the library door, halted a bare moment by the hall-rack, evidently to secure hat and coat, and then the outer door opened and closed softly—Merton had gone for Mrs. MacLaughlin.

Varge's hands, one at each end of the bar, rose to his chin, his elbows straight out from his body. Then very slowly the elbows closed in and downwards, a sweat bead sprang to his forehead, a panting gasp came from his lips, and slowly, very slowly, his hands crept together.

And now, guided by the sense of touch, Varge inserted one of the thin, flattened, javelin ends of the bar into the crack between the edge of the door and the jamb and just under the lock, and, with a steady pressure, began to lever backward. There was a slight creak of splitting woodwork, and then a little sharper sound as the lock began to yield

and give. Varge put out his left hand against the door to keep it from flying back with a thud against the wall—and wrenched it free.

Coolly, methodically, but still with the same sure swiftness that held neither haste nor indecision, he stepped back to the fireplace, placed the cash-box under his arm and laid the fender bar where he had found it at the Doctor's feet—only now the heavy wrought iron bar was no longer straight—*halfway down its length it was bent at right angles*.

Varge walked quickly to the front window and let the shade roll full to the top; then to the door, reaching up to press the button and throw on the light as he passed out. He closed the door behind him, went down the hall toward the rear, through the pantry, crossed the kitchen, unbolted the back door, and, stepping out into the night, ran the hundred yards to the bottom of the snow-covered garden. Here, he hurdled the high fence with a strong, agile swing; and now a wide, open tract of land was before him, leading upward in an easy rise to a pine wood a quarter of a mile away to the right, for which he headed.

The soft snow, lately fallen, was ankle deep above the harder crust beneath, but it did not seem either to impede his progress or cause him added exertion to maintain the pace he had set for himself. With arms close in at his sides, his head well up, every movement born of the instinct of the athlete, he was running now with long, tireless strides as he had never run in his life before.

Again and again, intruding upon that on which his mind was bent, surged with chaotic impetuosity a whirl of

thoughts—the past, Mrs. Merton, the Doctor, his own life; and once, in a flash, the thought of the future. Again and again, he drove them back—there would be time enough for that, God knew, in the days to come. *Now* it was his own acts of the past few minutes that were vital—carefully, logically, as he ran, he weighed and balanced them one by one, their relation to each other, their coherence as a whole. Had he made any mistake? Was there anywhere the little forgotten point, the flaw, that the keen wits to be pitted against him would pounce upon?

He had reached the edge of the wood now and plunged into the undergrowth. A few hundred yards in, he stopped and abruptly sat down on the trunk of a fallen tree where the snow lay thickest upon it. He rose immediately and sat down again at once upon the same trunk, but this time at a spot a little removed from the first. Again he rose, and now very rapidly tramped up and down, up and down, for a space of ten yards before the tree, sometimes varying his direction by erratic steps to the right and left.

And now, not *running*, but walking swiftly, he made his way out of the woods again, and, taking a course diagonal to that by which he had come, headed across the fields for a point on the town road a mile lower down than the Merton house—*a mile nearer the town*.

Again his mind was concentrated on his problem. The weak link in the chain was the *motive*—he had realised that, sensed that from the first—therefore the stronger must be the constructive, supporting evidence, irrefutable, positive, each small detail fitting as inevitably and significantly into the whole as little cogs fit essentially into ponderous and

complex machinery. For, from the moment Varge had accepted the guilt as his own, he had accepted it with all and everything that *finality* meant. To run from it, to beg the issue, was not only foreign to his every instinct, but it was certain eventual discovery of the truth. As a possibility it had undergone the almost unconscious, quick, accurate, mental surgery of Varge's mind—and had been eliminated from the outset. To count on suspicion being deflected from Harold Merton to himself by running away was almost worse than folly—at best it could but *divide* suspicion. Then would come investigation. Harold Merton was unpopular, disliked, and always had been from a boy; his New York record would be unearthed, one thing would follow another; the man himself, a mental, moral weakling, not big enough even in a vicious way to lie without stumbling, would be trapped and the end would be inevitable—and meanwhile over Mrs. Merton would hang the *shadow* of the truth, accentuating by days of agonised suspense the hideous certainty that sooner or later would be established. There had been only one way, only one *sure* way from the first.

There was left then, strange paradox! only the law itself to battle with. A plea of guilty to the crime of murder in that staid old New England state was neither accepted as a plea nor as proof of guilt. A confession he could make, but after that would come the probing, the investigation that must establish guilt beyond a reasonable doubt to corroborate the confession. And this, Varge, as he reached the road, was finally satisfied that he had done.

It was very black—only the white of the snow seemed to supply any light. It was very silent, very still—only his steps,

and those deadened in the soft, yielding flakes, gave sound. And in the blackness and the stillness there seemed a great mystery, a vastness, typifying a still most vast and mysterious beyond—another world, the world which lay on the other side of life. Varge raised his eyes to the dark, heavy cloud-mass overhead as he walked. There was no qualm of fear within him, just the serious, sober recognition and acceptance of the fact that each step brought him nearer to this mystery whose solving was in death. A month, two months, three, perhaps a little longer, and he would see these things from the *other* side.

Varge crossed the bridge over the little river and entered the town. He had met no one on the road—Robson then had not yet started back. He reached the square and quickened his pace as he headed across it. From the window of the sheriff's office on the ground floor of the courthouse—Berley Falls was the county seat—a light streamed forth, and from a sleigh before the door a man got out and hurried inside the building.

Varge was barely more than a couple of minutes behind him. The sheriff's door was wide open as Varge stepped into the corridor. Marston, the sheriff, was at the telephone. Handerlie, the deputy sheriff, the last arrival, his hands deep in his overcoat pockets, was staring, jaw dropped a little, at Robson. Robson, round, fatuous-faced, was talking in a high, excited key.

"No; of course, I didn't see him *do* it—but I see his *face* as he bent over the old Doctor with his head all covered with blood. If you'd seed that, you wouldn't need to ask who done it. Crickey, I tell you, it scart me! If he didn't do—"