HAROLD MACGRATH

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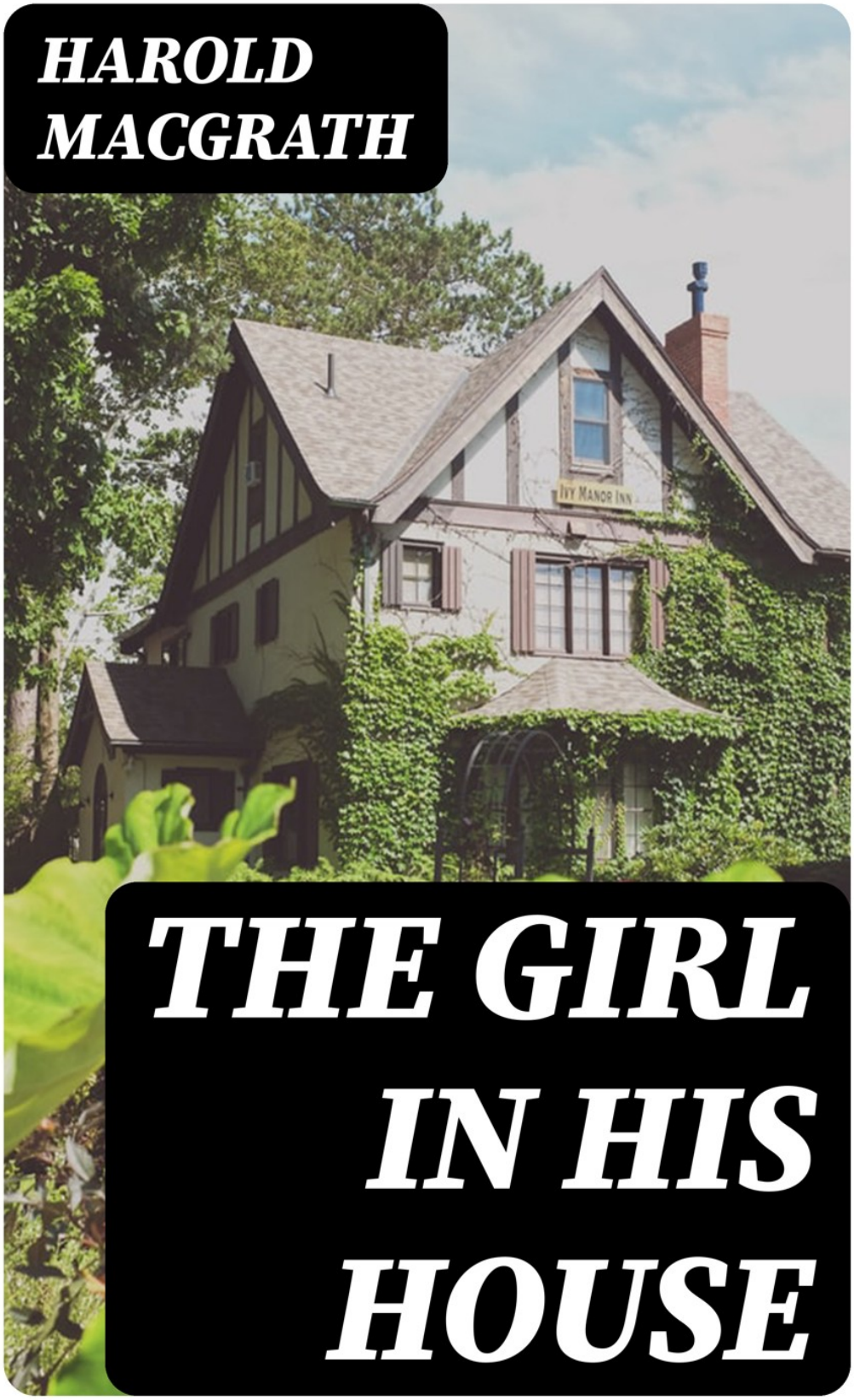

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

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CHAPTER I

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ARMITAGE had come thirteen thousand miles—across deserts, through jungles, over snow-clad peaks—as fast as camels and trains and ships could carry him, driven by an all-compelling desire. Sixty-odd days ago he had been in the amber-mines in the Hukawng Valley, where Upper Burma ends and western China begins; and here he was, riding up old Broadway—a Broadway that twinkled and glittered and glared with the same old colored clock lights. Men were queer animals. He had sworn never to set foot inside of New York again.

A paragraph in a New York newspaper, a sheet more than a year old and fallen to the base usage of wrapping-paper and protecting temporarily a roll of pudgy Burmese cheroots from the eternal mold of the middle Orient, had started him upon this tremendous, swinging journey. A thousand times he had perused that paragraph. Frayed and tattered to the point of disintegration, the clipping now reposed in his wallet. He no longer disturbed it; it wasn't necessary; he knew it by heart and could recite it word for word:

> JOHN SANDERSON, the multimillionaire packer, died yesterday at his summer home on Lake Michigan. He was sixty-nine years old.

The woman who had jilted Armitage was a widow.

Curious thing! He had come down from the top of the world, as it were, shamelessly, a flame in his heart that resembled a torch in the wind. So long as he pressed down through the jungles and deserts the flame burned with unabated ardor; but at Mandalay—the outer rim of civilization—it began to waver a little. At Rangoon it was like a candle in a breathless room. But on the way over to Calcutta it burst forth anew, and never wavered again until he came out on the tea veranda of the Bertolini and stared across Naples at Vesuvius in the moonlight. Even then he had not realized what was happening—that his torch, having nothing celestial in its substance, was burning out.

Two hours ago, as the great ship slipped into her berth, the last spark had flickered and vanished, leaving him with his heart full of bitter ashes. To have come thirteen thousand miles, like a whirlwind, only to learn that for six years he had been the victim of a delusion! He laughed aloud in savage irony. The old habits of civilization were clamoring for recognition; and first among these was the sense of shame, not because he had come all this distance, but because his love had been a poor thing and had not been strong enough to survive the ordeal. What an incomprehensible thing was the human heart!

Six long years in the far wildernesses, hugging a cold shadow for a substance, imagining himself to be a martyr when in truth he was only a simple fool! Shamelessly he had come to throw himself at her feet again; and behold! he was without desire.

The taxicab stopped. As Armitage stared over the shutter his mouth opened and his brows became Gothic arches of

amazed inquiry. The obsequies over a dead passion came to an abrupt, unfinished ending; the whole dismal affair went out of his thoughts as a wisp of smoke leaves a chimney-pot and disappears.

What in the name of the seven wonders could this mean? Lights—lights in the windows and lights in the hall. The silhouette of a woman appeared at one of the drawing-room windows. She was evidently looking out. Almost immediately she drew back. Armitage felt that frozen immobility peculiar to nightmares. Was he truly awake?

The front door of the brownstone opened and a bareheaded man ran down the steps to the vehicle. The smooth brass buttons on his coat marked him down as a butler. "Mr. Athelstone?" he asked, with subdued excitement.

"No. My mistake. I say, driver, we'll go to the hotel, after all."

"All right, sir."

"Sorry to trouble you. Wrong number," said Armitage to the astonished butler.

The taxicab grumbled and sputtered and started off jerkily; but until it wheeled around into Fifth Avenue the butler remained at the curb, while the world-wide traveler never took his bewildered gaze off the house with the lighted windows. Something inconceivable had happened, something so incredible and unexpected that Armitage was at that moment powerless to readjust himself to the event.

"Am I in the middle of a nightmare, or what?" he murmured, fumbling in his pockets for his pipe. "Lights, a

butler, and a woman at the window!" All at once he felt inspired.

"I say, driver, what street *was* that?"

"The street and number you gave me, Sir.

"Seventy-second?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you see the lights in the windows? Did you see the woman behind the curtains? Did a butler come down the steps?"

"Yes, sir. I heard him ask you if you were Mr. Athelstone."

"Then, by George, I'm awake!"

The driver escaped the heavy forewheels of an omnibus only by the narrowest margin. By the time he was in a mental condition to tell the omnibus-driver all about his family history it was too late; the rear wheels of the lumbering colossus of the asphalt were passing.

"Bug, pure bug!" he grumbled. This observation was not directed at the vanishing omnibus-driver; it was the final round of a series of cogitations relative to this "fare" of his. "Nothing to it; I ought to go straight to Bellevue. Lights? Of course there were lights!" He reached for the clutch and swore softly as the steamer trunk nicked his elbow.

Of all the queer dubs he had ever driven off Pier 53, this chap inside took the palm, ribbon and all. Off to the Racket Club as fast as the law allowed, only to hear his ludship say that he had forgotten he was no longer a member. Then, bang! for the hotel in Forty-second Street, where there was more doddering; and, whoof! a mile a minute up to the brownstone in Seventy-second. Lost in little old New York. And now the dub was smoking a pipe strong enough to

knock over a fire-horse. Luggage? Well, say! Three suit-cases that had come out of the Ark, and a battered English kitbag that had been Cain's on the big hike, and a gun-case that weighed a ton and must have scared the customs inspectors stiff.

When he stopped at the hotel entrance he looked thoughtfully at the meter. The old girl was working to the minute and was registering four dollars and eighty cents. He braced himself and shot out his jaw truculently. Now for that old mossback about crooked meters.

The curb porter threw open the door. The "fare" extricated himself from the luggage and stepped forth. "Here, driver; and keep the change."

The chauffeur, wise as Solomon and shrewd as Jacob, hastily inspected the bill under the meter lamp. It was a tenner. Five-twenty for a tip? Well, well; that wasn't so bad for a lunatic. "Thank you, sir," he mumbled, with rather a shamefaced amiability.

Armitage went into the lobby and wended his way through the superdressed dinner crowd to the desk. Two bell-boys staggered after him, panting. They set down the luggage and eyed it curiously. They were tolerably familiar with foreign labels, but here was a collection totally unknown to them. The clerk swung out the register and casually glanced at the straight body, the lean, tanned, handsome face of the guest, who, after a moment of trifling indecision, wrote "James Armitage, Como, Italy."

Once in his room, Armitage called for the floor waiter: "A club steak, fried sweets, lettuce, chilli sauce, and a pot of

coffee. Have it here quarter after eight. That will give me leeway for a bath."

"Yes, sir."

As the door closed Armitage scowled at his luggage, up from which drifted vaguely the unpleasant odor of formaldehyde. Lights—a woman behind the curtains—a butler who wanted to know if he was Mr. Athelstone!

"Hang me!" He climbed over the grips to the telephone and called up a number. "Give me Mr. Bordman, please.... Not at home? ... What? ... Went away last April? ... Thank you."

Armitage turned away from the telephone and twisted his mustache violently. Fear laid hold of him, that indescribable fear which, twist and turn as one may, keeps its face hidden. Below this fear stirred a primordial instinct: the instinct which causes a dog in the hour of carnal satiety to take the bare bone and bury it against a future need. Thunderstruck, Armitage recollected for the first time that he had not buried his bone.

"Pshaw! But that's utterly impossible."

He had bathed and dressed by the time the waiter returned—dressed in the same suit he had worn on board the ship. As the tantalizing aroma from the steak tickled his nostrils he forgot everything except the longing to satisfy a singular craving which had, metaphorically, ridden behind his saddle for six years. A thousand nights he had sat before acrid dung fires and dreamed of club steaks.

Finishing this delectable meal, a weirdly humorous idea popped into his head. He cleaned his pipe, put on a pair of rubber-soled shoes, loaded his automatic, and set forth

upon an adventure which was destined to renew his interest in civilization.

It was October. An east wind was blowing heartily and the old familiar tang of the sea was in the air. There was something in it that stirred in Armitage's mind fragmentary pictures from the seven seas, the sandy forelands, the bending cocoanut palms, the gay parrakeets in the clove-trees. The East was calling; and shortly he knew he would be answering it again. For the present, however, his destination was the brownstone house in Seventy-second Street, once ordinary enough, but now endued with a genuine mystery. The house was one of six in a compact row, a survival of the bald, ugly architecture of the seventies.

Upon finding himself in front of this house, Armitage knocked his pipe against the heel of his shoe. "I'm a reasonable man," he mused aloud—a habit he had acquired in the somber solitudes where the homely sound of one's voice is often a buckler against the unknown terrors of the night. "But who the dickens is this man Athelstone?"

He understood one fact clearly: six years ago he would not have contemplated, much less put to action, the project he now had in mind. He would have gone resolutely, if conveniently, up the steps, rung the bell, and satisfied his doubts peremptorily. In those far-off days impulses had always been carefully looked into and constantly rejected as either unlawful or unethical. He still recognized the unlawful, but the ethical no longer disturbed his mental processes. What he purposed to do was not exactly unlawful, considering his foreknowledge, but it was decidedly