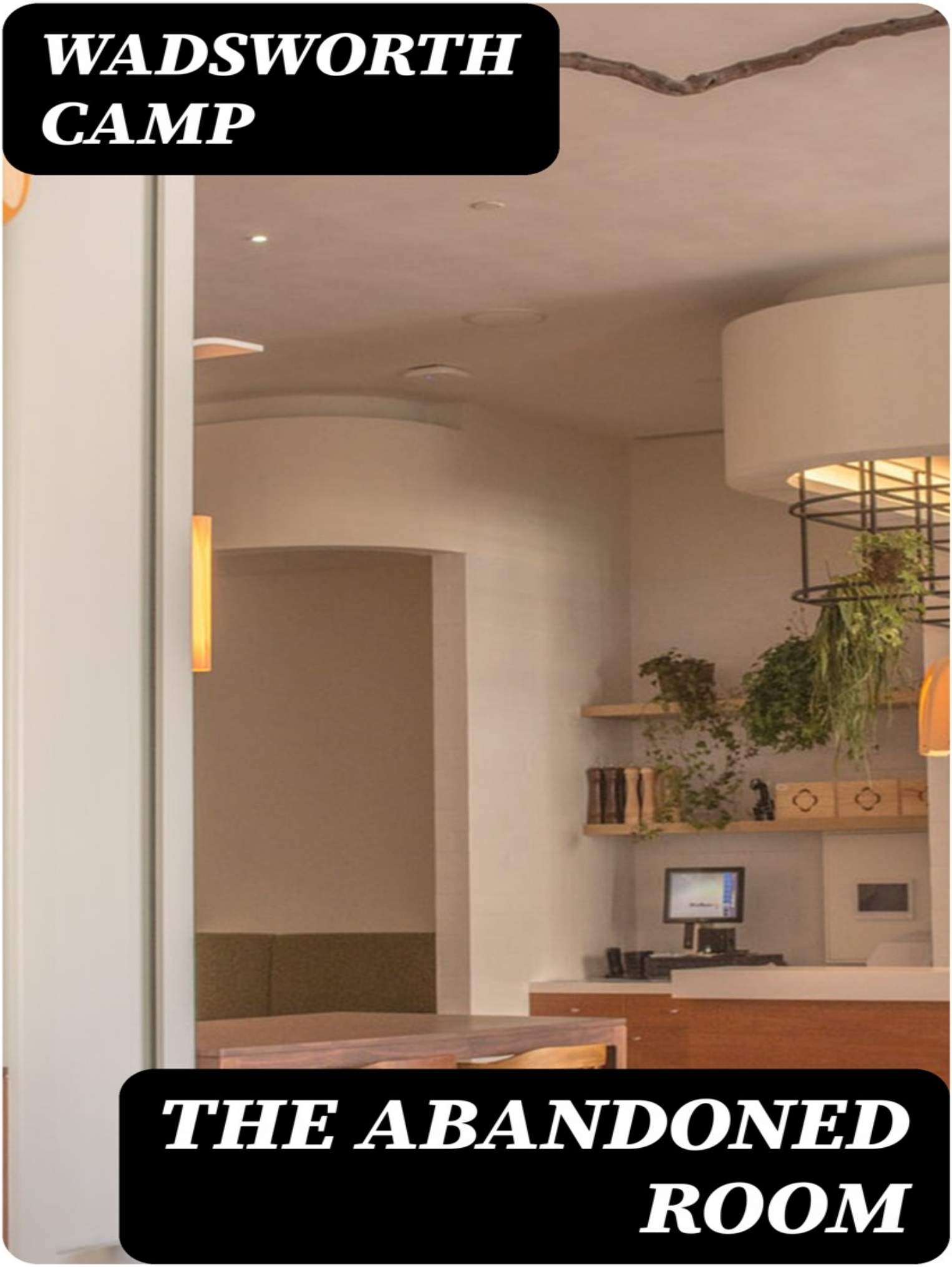
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THE ABANDONED ROOM

Wadsworth Camp

The Abandoned Room

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER I

Table of Contents

KATHERINE HEARS THE SLY STEP OF DEATH AT THE CEDARS

The night of his grandfather's mysterious death at the Cedars, Bobby Blackburn was, at least until midnight, in New York. He was held there by the unhealthy habits and companionships which recently had angered his grandfather to the point of threatening a disciplinary change in his will. As a consequence he drifted into that strange adventure which later was to surround him with dark shadows and overwhelming doubts.

Before following Bobby through his black experience, however, it is better to know what happened at the Cedars where his cousin, Katherine Perrine was, except for the servants, alone with old Silas Blackburn who seemed apprehensive of some sly approach of disaster.

At twenty Katherine was too young, too light-hearted for this care of her uncle in which she had persisted as an antidote for Bobby's shortcomings. She was never in harmony with the mouldy house or its surroundings, bleak, deserted, unfriendly to content.

Bobby and she had frequently urged the old man to give it up, to move, as it were, into the light. He had always answered angrily that his ancestors had lived there since before the Revolution, and that what had been good enough for them was good enough for him. So that night Katherine had to hear alone the sly stalking of death in the house. She told it all to Bobby the next day—what happened, her emotions, the impression made on her by the people who came when it was too late to save Silas Blackburn.

She said, then, that the old man had behaved oddly for several days, as if he were afraid. That night he ate practically no dinner. He couldn't keep still. He wandered from room to room, his tired eyes apparently seeking. Several times she spoke to him.

"What is the matter, Uncle? What worries you?"

He grumbled unintelligibly or failed to answer at all.

She went into the library and tried to read, but the late fall wind swirled mournfully about the house and beat down the chimney, causing the fire to cast disturbing shadows across the walls. Her loneliness, and her nervousness, grew sharper. The restless, shuffling footsteps stimulated her imagination. Perhaps a mental breakdown was responsible for this alteration. She was tempted to ring for Jenkins, the butler, to share her vigil; or for one of the two women servants, now far at the back of the house.

"And Bobby," she said to herself, "or somebody will have to come out here to-morrow to help."

But Silas Blackburn shuffled in just then, and she was a trifle ashamed as she studied him standing with his back to the fire, glaring around the room, fumbling with hands that

shook in his pocket for his pipe and some loose tobacco. It was unjust to be afraid of him. There was no question. The man himself was afraid—terribly afraid.

His fingers trembled so much that he had difficulty lighting his pipe. His heavy brows, gray like his beard, contracted in a frown. His voice quavered unexpectedly. He spoke of his grandson:

"Bobby! Damned waster! God knows what he'll do next."

"He's young, Uncle Silas, and too popular."

He brushed aside her customary defence. As he continued speaking she noticed that always his voice shook as his fingers shook, as his stooped shoulders jerked spasmodically.

"I ordered Mr. Robert here to-night. Not a word from him. I'd made up my mind anyway. My lawyer's coming in the morning. My money goes to the Bedford Foundation—all except a little annuity for you, Katy. It's hard on you, but I've got no faith left in my flesh and blood."

His voice choked with a sentiment a little repulsive in view of his ruthless nature, his unbending egotism.

"It's sad, Katy, to grow old with nobody caring for you except to covet your money."

She arose and went close to him. He drew back, startled.

"You're not fair, Uncle."

With an unexpected movement, nearly savage, he pushed her aside and started for the door.

"Uncle!" she cried. "Tell me! You must tell me! What makes you afraid?"

He turned at the door. He didn't answer. She laughed feverishly.

"It—it's not Bobby you're afraid of?"

"You and Bobby," he grumbled, "are thicker than thieves."

She shook her head.

"Bobby and I," she said wistfully, "aren't very good friends, largely because of this life he's leading."

He went on out of the room, mumbling again incoherently.

She resumed her vigil, unable to read because of her misgivings, staring at the fire, starting at a harsher gust of wind or any unaccustomed sound. And for a long time there beat against her brain the shuffling, searching tread of her uncle. Its cessation about eleven o'clock increased her uneasiness. He had been so afraid! Suppose already the thing he had feared had overtaken him? She listened intently. Even then she seemed to sense the soundless footsteps of disaster straying in the decayed house, and searching, too.

A morbid desire to satisfy herself that her uncle's silence meant nothing evil drove her upstairs. She stood in the square main hall at the head of the stairs, listening. Her uncle's bedroom door lay straight ahead. To her right and left narrow corridors led to the wings. Her room and Bobby's and a spare room were in the right-hand wing. The opposite corridor was seldom used, for the left-hand wing was the oldest portion of the house, and in the march of years too many legends had gathered about it. The large bedroom was there with its private hall beyond, and a narrow, enclosed staircase, descending to the library. Originally it had been the custom for the head of the family to use that

room. Its ancient furniture still faded within stained walls. For many years no one had slept in it, because it had sheltered too much suffering, because it had witnessed the reluctant spiritual departure of too many Blackburns.

Katherine shrank a little from the black entrance of the corridor, but her anxiety centred on the door ahead. She was about to call when a stirring beyond it momentarily reassured her.

The door opened and her uncle stepped out. He wore an untidy dressing-gown. His hair was disordered. His face appeared grayer and more haggard than it had downstairs. A lighted candle shook in his right hand.

"What are you doing up here, Katy?" he quavered.

She broke down before the picture of his increased fear. He shuffled closer.

"What you crying for, Katy?"

She controlled herself. She begged him for an answer to her doubts.

"You make me afraid."

He laughed scornfully.

"You! What you got to be afraid of?"

"I'm afraid because you are," she urged. "You've got to tell me. I'm all alone. I can't stand it. What are you afraid of?"

He didn't answer. He shuffled on toward the disused wing. Her hand tightened on the banister.

"Where are you going?" she whispered.

He turned at the entrance to the corridor.

"I am going to the old bedroom."

"Why? Why?" she asked hysterically. "You can't sleep there. The bed isn't even made."

He lowered his voice to a hoarse whisper:

"Don't you mention I've gone there. If you want to know, I am afraid. I'm afraid to sleep in my own room any longer."

She nodded.

"And you don't think they'd look for you there. What is it? Tell me what it is. Why don't you send for some one—a man?"

"Leave me alone," he mumbled. "Nothing for you to be worried about, except Bobby."

"Yes, there is," she cried. "Yes, there is."

He paid no attention to her fright. He entered the corridor. She heard him shuffling between its narrow walls. She saw his candle disappear in its gloomy reaches.

She ran to her own room and locked the door. She hurried to the window and leaned out, her body shaking, her teeth chattering as if from a sudden chill. The quiet, assured tread of disaster came nearer.

The two wings, stretching at right angles from the main building, formed a narrow court. Clouds harrying the moon failed quite to destroy its power, so that she could see, across the court, the facade of the old wing and the two windows of the large room through whose curtains a spectral glow was diffused. She heard one of the windows opened with a grating noise. The court was a sounding board. It carried to her even the shuffling of the old man's feet as he must have approached the bed. The glow of his candle vanished. She heard a rustling as if he had stretched himself on the bed, a sound like a long-drawn sigh.

She tried to tell herself there was no danger—that these peculiar actions sprang from the old man's fancy—but the house, her surroundings, her loneliness, contradicted her. To her over-acute senses the thought of Blackburn in that room, so often consecrated to the formula of death, suggested a special and unaccountable menace. Under such a strain the supernatural assumed vague and singular shapes.

She slept for only a little while. Then she lay awake, listening with a growing expectancy for some message to slip across the court. The moon had ceased struggling. The wind cried. The baying of a dog echoed mournfully from a great distance. It was like a remote alarm bell which vibrates too perfectly, whose resonance is too prolonged.

She sat upright. She sprang from the bed and, her heart beating insufferably, felt her way to the window. From the wing opposite the message had come—a soft, shrouded sound, another long-drawn sigh.

She tried to call across the court. At first no response came from her tight throat. When it did at last, her voice was unfamiliar in her own ears, the voice of one who has to know a thing but shrinks from asking.

"Uncle!"

The wind mocked her.

"It is nothing," she told herself, "nothing."

But her vigil had been too long, her loneliness too complete. Her earlier impression of the presence of death in the decaying house tightened its hold. She had to assure herself that Silas Blackburn slept untroubled. The thing she had heard was peculiar, and he hadn't answered across the

court. The dark, empty corridors at first were an impassable barrier, but while she put on her slippers and her dressing-gown she strengthened her courage. There was a bell rope in the upper hall. She might get Jenkins.

When she stood in the main hall she hesitated. It would probably be a long time, provided he heard at all, before Jenkins could answer her. Her candle outlined the entrance to the musty corridor. Just a few running steps down there, a quick rap at the door, and, perhaps, in an instant her uncle's voice, and the blessed power to return to her room and sleep!

While her fear grew she called on her pride to let her accomplish that brief, abhorrent journey.

Then for the first time a different doubt came to her. As she waited alone in this disturbing nocturnal intimacy of an old house, she shrank from no thought of human intrusion, and she wondered if her uncle had been afraid of that, too, of the sort of thing that might lurk in the ancient wing with its recollections of birth and suffering and death. But he had gone there as an escape. Surely he had been afraid of men. It shamed her that, in spite of that, her fear defined itself ever more clearly as something indefinable. With a passionate determination to strangle such thoughts she held her breath. She tried to close her mind. She entered the corridor. She ran its length. She knocked at the locked door of the old bedroom. She shrank as the echoes rattled from the dingy walls where her candle cast strange reflections. There was no other answer. A sense of an intolerable companionship made her want to cry out for brilliant light, for help. She screamed.

"Uncle Silas! Uncle Silas!"

Through the silence that crushed her voice she became aware finally of the accomplishment of its mission by death in this house. And she fled into the main hall. She jerked at the bell rope. The contact steadied her, stimulated her to reason. One slender hope remained. The oppressive bedroom might have driven Silas Blackburn through the private hall and down the enclosed staircase. Perhaps he slept on the lounge in the library.

She stumbled down, hoping to meet Jenkins. She crossed the hall and the dining room and entered the library. She bent over the lounge. It was empty. Her candle was reflected in the face of the clock on the mantel. Its hands pointed to half-past two.

She pulled at the bell cord by the fireplace. Why didn't the butler come? Alone she couldn't climb the enclosed staircase to try the other door. It seemed impossible to her that she should wait another instant alone—

The butler, as old and as gray as Silas Blackburn, faltered in. He started back when he saw her.

"My God, Miss Katherine! What's the matter? You look like death."

"There's death," she said.

She indicated the door of the enclosed staircase. She led the way with the candle. The panelled, narrow hall was empty. That door, too, was locked and the key, she knew, must be on the inside.

"Who—who is it?" Jenkins asked. "Who would be in that room? Has Mr.
Bobby come back?"

She descended to the library before answering. She put the candle down and spread her hands.

"It's happened, Jenkins—whatever he feared."

"Not Mr. Silas?"

"We have to break in," she said with a shiver. "Get a hammer, a chisel, whatever is necessary."

"But if there's anything wrong," the butler objected, "if anybody's been there, the other door must be open."

She shook her head. Those two first of all faced that extraordinary puzzle. How had the murderer entered and left the room with both doors locked on the inside, with the windows too high for use? They went to the upper story. She urged the butler into the sombre corridor.

"We have to know," she whispered, "what's happened beyond those locked doors."

She still vibrated to the feeling of unconformable forces in the old house. Jenkins, she saw, responded to the same superstitious misgivings. He inserted the chisel with maladroit hands. He forced the lock back and opened the door. Dust arose from the long-disused room, flecking the yellow candle flame. They hesitated on the threshold. They forced themselves to enter. Then they looked at each other and smiled with relief, for Silas Blackburn, in his dressing-gown, lay on the bed, his placid, unmarked face upturned, as if sleeping.

"Why, miss," Jenkins gasped. "He's all right."

Almost with confidence Katherine walked to the bed.

"Uncle Silas—" she began, and touched his hand.

She drew back until the wall supported her. Jenkins must have read everything in her face, for he whimpered:

"But he looks all right. He can't be—"

"Cold—already! If I hadn't touched—"

The horror of the thing descended upon her, stifling thought. Automatically she left the room and told Jenkins what to do. After he had telephoned police headquarters in the county seat and had summoned Doctor Groom, a country physician, she sat without words, huddled over the library fire.

The detective, a competent man named Howells, and Doctor Groom arrived at about the same time. The detective made Katherine accompany them upstairs while he questioned her. In the absence of the coroner he wouldn't let the doctor touch the body.

"I must repair this lock," he said, "the first thing, so nothing can be disturbed."

Doctor Groom, a grim and dark man, had grown silent on entering the room. For a long time he stared at the body in the candle light, making as much of an examination as he could, evidently, without physical contact.

"Why did he ever come here to sleep?" he asked in his rumbling bass voice. "Nasty room! Unhealthy room! Ten to one you're a formality, policeman. Coroner's a formality."

He sneered a little.

"I daresay he died what the hard-headed world will call a natural death.
Wonder what the coroner'll say."

The detective didn't answer. He shot rapid, uneasy glances about the room in which a single candle burned. After a time he said with an accent of complete conviction:

"That man was murdered."

Perhaps the doctor's significant words, added to her earlier dread of the abnormal, made Katherine read in the detective's manner an apprehension of conditions unfamiliar to the brutal routine of his profession. Her glances were restless, too. She had a feeling that from the shadowed corners of the faded, musty room invisible faces mocked the man's stubbornness.

All this she recited to Bobby when, under extraordinary circumstances neither of them could have foreseen, he arrived at the Cedars many hours later.

Of the earlier portion of the night of his grandfather's death Bobby retained a minute recollection. The remainder was like a dim, appalling nightmare whose impulse remains hidden.

When he went to his apartment to dress for dinner he found the letter of which Silas Blackburn had spoken to Katherine. It mentioned the change in the will as an approaching fact nothing could alter. Bobby fancied that the old man merely craved the satisfaction of terrorizing him, of casting him out with all the ugly words at his command. Still a good deal more than a million isn't to be relinquished lightly as long as a chance remains. Bobby had an engagement for dinner. He would think the situation over until after dinner, then he might go.

It was, perhaps, unfortunate that at his club he met friends who drew him in a corner and offered him too many cocktails. As he drank his anger grew, and it wasn't all against his grandfather. He asked himself why during the last few months he had avoided the Cedars, why he had drifted into too vivid a life in New York. It increased his anger

that he hesitated to give himself a frank answer. But always at such moments it was Katherine rather than his grandfather who entered his mind. He had cared too much for her, and lately, beyond question, the bond of their affection had weakened.

He raised his glass and drank. He set the glass down quickly as if he would have liked to hide it. A big man, clear-eyed and handsome, walked into the room and came straight to the little group in the corner. Bobby tried to carry it off.

"'Lo, Hartley, old preacher. You fellows all know Hartley Graham? Sit down. We're going to have a little cocktail."

Graham looked at the glasses, shaking his head.

"If you've time, Bobby, I'd like a word with you."

"No preaching," Bobby bargained. "It isn't Sunday."

Graham laughed pleasantly.

"It's about money. That talks any day."

Bobby edged a way out and followed Graham to an unoccupied room. There the big man turned on him.

"See here, Bobby! When are you going out to the Cedars?"

Bobby flushed.

"You're a dear friend, Hartley, and I've always loved you, but I'm in no mood for preaching tonight. Besides, I've got my own life to lead"—he glanced away—"my own reasons for leading it."

"I'm not going to preach," Graham answered seriously, "although it's obvious you're raising the devil with your life. I wanted to tell you that I've had a note from Katherine to-day. She says your grandfather's threats are taking too

much form; that the new will's bound to come unless you do something. She cares too much for you, Bobby, to see you throw everything away. She's asked me to persuade you to go out."

"Why didn't she write to me?"

"Have you been very friendly with Katherine lately? And that's not fair. You're both without parents. You owe Katherine something on that account."

Bobby didn't answer, because it was clear that while Katherine's affection for him had weakened, her friendship for Graham had grown too fast. Looking at the other he didn't wonder.

"There's another thing," Graham was saying. "The gloomy old Cedars has got on Katherine's nerves, and she says there's been a change in the old man the last few days —wanders around as if he were afraid of something."

Bobby laughed outright.

"Him afraid of something! It's always been his system to make everybody and everything afraid of him. But you're right about Katherine. We have always depended on each other. I think I'll go out after dinner."

"Then come have a bite with me," Graham urged. "I'll see you off afterward. If you catch the eight-thirty you ought to be out there before half-past ten."

Bobby shook his head.

"An engagement for dinner, Hartley. I'm expecting Carlos Paredes to pick me up here any minute."

Graham's disapproval was belligerent.

"Why, in the name of heaven, Bobby, do you run around with that damned Panamanian? Steer him off to-night. I've

argued with you before. It's unpleasant, I know, but the man carries every mark of crookedness."

"Easy with my friends, Hartley! You don't understand Carlos. He's good fun when you know him—awfully good fun."

"So," Graham said, "is this sort of thing. Too many cocktails, too much wine. Paredes has the same pleasant, dangerous quality."

A club servant entered.

"In the reception room, Mr. Blackburn."

Bobby took the card, tore it into little bits, and dropped them one by one into the waste-paper basket.

"Tell him I'll be right out." He turned to Graham.

"Sorry you don't like my playmates. I'll probably run out after dinner and let the old man terrorize me as a cure for his own fear. Pleasant prospect! So long."

Graham caught at his arm.

"I'm sorry. Can't we forget to-night that we disagree about Paredes? Let me dine with you."

Bobby's laugh was uncomfortable.

"Come on, if you wish, and be my guardian angel. God knows I need one."

He walked across the hall and into the reception room. The light was not brilliant there. One or two men sat reading newspapers about a green-shaded lamp on the centre table, but Bobby didn't see Paredes at first. Then from the obscurity of a corner a form, tall and graceful, emerged with a slow monotony of movement suggestive of stealth. The man's dark, sombre eyes revealed nothing. His jet-black hair, parted in the middle, and his carefully trimmed Van

Dyke beard gave him an air of distinction, an air, at the same time, a trifle too reserved. For a moment, as the green light stained his face unhealthily, Bobby could understand Graham's aversion. He brushed the idea aside.

"Glad you've come, Carlos."

The smile of greeting vanished abruptly from Paredes's face. He looked with steady eyes beyond Bobby's shoulder. Bobby turned. Graham stood on the threshold, his face a little too frank. But the two men shook hands.

"I'd an idea until I saw Bobby," Graham said, "that you'd gone back to Panama."

Paredes yawned.

"Each year I spend more time in New York. Business suggests it. Pleasure demands it."

His voice was deep and pleasant, but Bobby had often remarked that it, like Paredes's eyes, was too reserved. It seemed never to call on its obvious powers of expression. Its accent was noticeable only in a pleasant, polished sense.

"Hartley," Bobby explained, "is dining with us."

Paredes let no disapproval slip, but Graham hastened to explain.

"Bobby and I have an engagement immediately after dinner."

"An engagement after dinner! I didn't understand—"

"Let's think of dinner first," Bobby said. "We can talk about engagements afterward. Perhaps you'll have a cocktail here while we decide where we're going."

"The aperitif I should like very much," Paredes said. "About dinner there is nothing to decide. I have arranged

everything. There's a table waiting in the Fountain Room at the C—— and there I have planned a little surprise for you."

He wouldn't explain further. While they drank their cocktails Bobby watched Graham's disapproval grow. The man glanced continually at his watch. In the restaurant, when Paredes left them to produce, as he called it, his surprise, Graham appraised with a frown the voluble people who moved intricately through the hall.

"I'm afraid Paredes has planned a thorough evening," he said, "for which he'll want you to pay. Don't be angry, Bobby. The situation is serious enough to excuse facts. You must go to the Cedars to-night. Do you understand? You must go, in spite of Paredes, in spite of everything."

"Peace until train time," Bobby demanded.

He caught his breath.

"There they are. Carlos *has* kept his word. See her, Hartley. She's glorious."

A young woman accompanied the Panamanian as he came back through the hall. She appeared more foreign than her guide—the Spanish of Spain rather than of South America. Her clothing was as unusual and striking as her beauty, yet one felt there was more than either to attract all the glances in this room, to set people whispering as she passed. Clearly she knew her notoriety was no little thing. Pride filled her eyes.

Paredes had first introduced her to Bobby a month or more ago. He had seen her a number of times since in her dressing-room at the theatre where she was featured, or at crowded luncheons in her apartment. At such moments she had managed to be exceptionally nice to him. Bobby,

however, had answered merely to the glamour of her fame, to the magnetic response her beauty always brought in places like this.

"Paredes," Graham muttered, "will have a powerful ally. You won't fail me, Bobby? You will go?"

Bobby scarcely heard. He hurried forward and welcomed the woman. She tapped his arm with her fan.

"Leetle Bobby!" she lisped. "I haven't seen very much of you lately. So when Carlos proposed—you see I don't dance until late. Who is that behind you? Mr. Graham, is it not? He would, maybe, not remember me. I danced at a dinner where you were one night, at Mr. Ward's. Even lawyers, I find, take enjoyment in my dancing."

"I remember," Graham said. "It is very pleasant we are to dine together." He continued tactlessly: "But, as I've explained to Mr. Paredes, we must hurry. Bobby and I have an early engagement."

Her head went up.

"An early engagement! I do not often dine in public."

"An unavoidable thing," Graham explained. "Bobby will tell you."

Bobby nodded.

"It's a nuisance, particularly when you're so condescending, Maria."

She shrugged her shoulders. With Bobby she entered the dining-room at the heels of Paredes and Graham.

Paredes had foreseen everything. There were flowers on the table. The dinner had been ordered. Immediately the waiter brought cocktails. Graham glanced at Bobby

warningly. He wouldn't, as an example Bobby appreciated, touch his own. Maria held hers up to the light.

"Pretty yellow things! I never drink them."

She smiled dreamily at Bobby.

"But see! I shall place this to my lips in order that you may make pretty speeches, and maybe tell me it is the most divine aperitif you have ever drunk."

She passed the glass to him, and Bobby, avoiding Graham's eyes, wondering why she was so gracious, emptied it. And afterward frequently she reminded him of his wine by going through the same elaborate formula. Probably because of that, as much as anything else, constraint grasped the little company tighter. Graham couldn't hide his anxiety. Paredes mocked it with sneering phrases which he turned most carefully. Before the meal was half finished Graham glanced at his watch.

"We've just time for the eight-thirty," he whispered to Bobby, "if we pick up a taxi."

Maria had heard. She pouted.

"There is no engagement," she lisped, "as sacred as a dinner, no entanglement except marriage that cannot be easily broken. Perhaps I have displeased you, Mr. Graham. Perhaps you fancy I excite unpleasant comment. It is unjust. I assure you my reputation is above reproach"—her dark eyes twinkled—"certainly in New York."

"It isn't that," Graham answered. "We must go. It's not to be evaded."

She turned tempestuously.

"Am I to be humiliated so? Carlos! Why did you bring me? Is all the world to see my companions leave in the midst of

a dinner as if I were plague-touched? Is Bobby not capable of choosing his own company?"

"You are thoroughly justified, Maria," Paredes said in his expressionless tones. "Bobby, however, has said very little about this engagement. I did not know, Mr. Graham, that you were the arbiter of Bobby's actions. In a way I must resent your implication that he is no longer capable of caring for himself."

Graham accepted the challenge. He leaned across the table, speaking directly to Bobby, ignoring the others:

"You've not forgotten what I told you. Will you come while there's time?
You must see. I can't remain here any longer."

Bobby, hating warfare in his present mood, sought to temporize:

"It's all right, Hartley. Don't worry. I'll catch a later train."

Maria relaxed.

"Ah! Bobby still chooses for himself."

"I'll have enough rumpus," Bobby muttered, "when I get to the Cedars.
Don't grudge me a little peace here."

Graham arose. His voice was discouraged.

"I'm sorry. I'll hope, Bobby."

Without a word to the others he walked out of the room.

So far, when Bobby tried afterward to recall the details of the evening, everything was perfectly distinct in his memory. The remainder of the meal, made uncomfortable by Maria's sullenness and Paredes's sneers, his attempt to recapture the earlier gayety of the evening by continuing to drink the wine, his determination to go later to the Cedars in

spite of Graham's doubt—of all these things no particular lacked. He remembered paying the check, as he usually did when he dined with Paredes. He recalled studying the time-table and finding that he had just missed another train.

Maria's spirits rose then. He was persuaded to accompany her and Paredes to the music hall. In her dressing-room, while she was on the stage, he played with the boxes of make-up, splashing the mirror with various colours while Paredes sat silently watching.

The alteration, he was sure, came a little later in the cafe at a table close to the dancing floor. Maria had insisted that Paredes and he should wait there while she changed.

"But," he had protested, "I have missed too many trains."

She had demanded his time-table, scanning the columns of close figures.

"There is one," she had said, "at twelve-fifteen—time for a little something in the cafe, and who knows? If you are agreeable I might forgive everything and dance with you once, Bobby, on the public floor."

So he sat for some time, expectant, with Paredes, watching the boisterous dancers, listening to the violent music, sipping absent-mindedly at his glass. He wondered why Paredes had grown so quiet.

"I mustn't miss that twelve-fifteen," he said, "You know, Carlos, you weren't quite fair to Hartley. He's a splendid fellow. Roomed with me at college, played on same team, and all that. Only wanted me to do the right thing. Must say it was the right thing. I won't miss that twelve-fifteen."

"Graham," Paredes sneered, "is a wonderful type—Apollo in the flesh and

Billy Sunday in the conscience."

Then, as Bobby started to protest, Maria entered, more dazzling than at dinner; and the dancers swayed less boisterously, the chatter at the tables subsided, the orchestra seemed to hesitate as a sort of obeisance.

A man Bobby had never seen before followed her to the table. His middle-aged figure was loudly clothed. His face was coarse and clean shaven. He acknowledged the introductions sullenly.

"I've only a minute," Bobby said to Maria.

He continued, however, to raise his glass indifferently to his lips. All at once his glass shook. Maria's dark and sparkling face became blurred. He could no longer define the features of the stranger. He had never before experienced anything of the kind. He tried to account for it, but his mind became confused.

"Maria!" he burst out. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

Her contralto laugh rippled.

"Bobby looks so funny! Carlos! Leetle Bobby looks so queer! What is the matter with him?"

Bobby's anger was lost in the increased confusion of his senses, but through that mental turmoil tore the thought of Graham and his intention of going to the Cedars. With shaking fingers he dragged out his watch. He couldn't read the dial. He braced his hands against the table, thrust back his chair, and arose. The room tumbled about him. Before his eyes the dancers made long nebulous bands of colour in which nothing had form or coherence. Instinctively he felt

he hadn't dined recklessly enough to account for these amazing symptoms. He was suddenly afraid.

"Carlos!" he whispered.

He heard Maria's voice dimly:

"Take him home."

A hand touched his arm. With a supreme effort of will he walked from the room, guided by the hand on his arm. And always his brain recorded fewer and fewer impressions for his memory to struggle with later.

At the cloak room some one helped him put on his coat. He was walking down steps. He was in some kind of a conveyance. He didn't know what it was. An automobile, a carriage, a train? He didn't know. He only understood that it went swiftly, swaying from side to side through a sable pit. Whenever his mind moved at all it came back to that sensation of a black pit in which he remained suspended, swinging from side to side, trying to struggle up against impossible odds. Once or twice words flashed like fire through the pit: "Tyrant!—Fool to go."

From a long immersion deeper in the pit he struggled frantically. He must get out. Somehow he must find wings. He realized that his eyes were closed. He tried to open them and failed. So the pit persisted and he surrendered himself, as one accepts death, to its hateful blackness.

Abruptly he experienced a momentary release. There was no more swaying, no more movement of any kind. He heard a strange, melancholy voice, whispering without words, always whispering with a futile perseverance as if it wished him to understand something it could not express.

"What is it trying to tell me?" he asked himself.

Then he understood. It was the voice of the wind, and it tried to tell him to open his eyes, and he found that he could. But in spite of his desire they closed again almost immediately. Yet, from that swift glimpse, a picture outlined itself later in his memory.

In the midst of wild, rolling clouds, the moon was a drowning face. Stunted trees bent before the wind like puny men who strained impotently to advance. Over there was one more like a real man—a figure, Bobby thought, with a black thing over its face—a mask.

"This is the forest near the Cedars," Bobby said to himself. "I've come to face the old devil after all."

He heard his own voice, harsh, remote, unnatural, speaking to the dim figure with a black mask that waited half hidden by the straining trees.

"Why am I here in the woods near the Cedars?"

And he thought the thing answered:

"Because you hate your grandfather."

Bobby laughed, thinking he understood. The figure in the black mask that accompanied him was his conscience. He could understand why it went masked.

The wind resumed its whispering. The figures, straining like puny men, fought harder. The drowning face disappeared, wet and helpless. Bobby felt himself sinking back, back into the sable pit.

"I don't want to go," he moaned.

A long time afterward he heard a whisper again, and he wondered if it was the wind or his conscience. He laughed through the blackness because the words seemed so absurd.

"Take off your shoes and carry them in your hand. Always do that. It is the only safe way."

He laughed again, thinking:

"What a careful conscience!"

He retained only one more impression. He was dully aware that some time had passed. He shivered. He thought the wind had grown angry with him, for it no longer whispered. It shrieked, and he could make nothing of its wrath. He struggled frantically to emerge from the pit. The quality of the blackness deepened. His fright grew. He felt himself slipping, slowly at first then faster, faster down into impossible depths, and there was nothing at all he could do to save himself.

* * * * *

"Go away! For God's sake, go away!"

Bobby thought he was speaking to the sombre figure in the mask. His voice aroused him to one more effort at escape, but he felt that there was no use. He was too deep.

Something hurt his eyes. He opened them and for a time was blinded by a narrow shaft, of sunlight resting on his face. With an effort he moved his head to one side and closed his eyes again, at first merely thankful that he had escaped from the black hell, trying to control his sensations of physical evil. Subtle curiosity forced its way into his sick brain and stung him wide awake. This time his eyes remained open, staring about him, dilating with a wilder fright than he had experienced in the dark mazes of his nightmare adventure.

He had never seen this place before. He lay on the floor of an empty room. The shaft of sunlight that had aroused

him entered through a crack in one of the tightly drawn blinds. There were dust and grime on the wails, and cobwebs clustered in the corners.

In the silent, deserted room the beating of his heart became audible. He struggled to a sitting posture. He gasped for breath. He knew it was very cold in here, but perspiration moistened his face. He could recall no such suffering as this since, when a boy, he had slipped from the crisis of a destructive fever.

Had he been drugged? But he had been with friends. There was no motive.

What house was this? Was it, like this room, empty and deserted? How had he come here? For the first time he went through that dreadful process of trying to draw from the black pit useful memories.

He started, recalling the strange voice and its warning, for his shoes lay near by as though he might have dropped them carelessly when he had entered the room and stretched himself on the floor. Damp earth adhered to the soles. The leather above was scratched.

"Then," he thought, "that much is right. I was in the woods. What was I doing there? That dim figure! My imagination."

He suffered the agony of a man who realizes that he has wandered unawares in strange places, and retains no recollection of his actions, of his intentions. He went back to that last unclouded moment in the cafe with Maria, Paredes, and the stranger. Where had he gone after he had left them? He had looked at his watch. He had told himself he must catch the twelve-fifteen train. He must have gone from

the restaurant, proceeding automatically, and caught the train. That would account for the sensation of motion in a swift vehicle, and perhaps there had been a taxicab to the station. Doubtless in the woods near the Cedars he had decided it was too late to go in, or that it was wiser not to. He had answered to the necessity of sleeping somewhere. But why had he come here? Where, indeed, was he?

At least he could answer that. He drew on his shoes—a pair of patent leather pumps. He fumbled for his handkerchief, thinking he would brush the earth from them. He searched each of his pockets. His handkerchief was gone. No matter. He got to his feet, lurching for a moment dizzily. He glanced with distaste at his rumpled evening clothing. To hide it as far as possible he buttoned his overcoat collar about his neck. On tip-toe he approached the door, and, with the emotions of a thief, opened it quietly. He sighed. The rest of the house was as empty as this room. The hall was thick with dust. The rear door by which he must have entered stood half open. The lock was broken and rusty.

He commenced to understand. There was a deserted farmhouse less than two miles from the Cedars. Since he had always known about it, it wasn't unusual he should have taken shelter there after deciding not to go in to his grandfather.

He stepped through the doorway to the unkempt yard about whose tumbled fences the woods advanced thickly. He recognized the place. For some time he stood ashamed, yet fair enough to seek the cause of his experience in some