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The Maze

by

Maurice Sandoz

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THE MAZE

WORKS BY
MAURICE SANDOZ

IN FRENCH

LE JEUNE AUTEUR ET LE PERROQUET	<i>Payot, Paris (Out of Print)</i>
CONTES ET NOUVELLES	<i>Edition du Verseau, Lausanne</i>
SOUVENIRS FANTASTIQUES	" " " "
TROIS HISTOIRES BIZARRES	" " " "
LE LABYRINTHE	<i>Kundig, Genève</i>
LA MAISON SANS FENETRES	<i>Payot, Lausanne</i>

POETRY

EPIGRAMMES ET SONNETS	<i>Edition du Verseau, Lausanne</i>
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WORKS TRANSLATED INTO GERMAN

ERZÄHLUNGEN UND NOVELLEN	<i>Gebrüder Fretz, Zurich</i>
SELTSAME ERINNERUNGEN	" " "
NEUES ERINERN	" " "
DER LABYRINTH	<i>Morgarten Verlag, Zurich</i>

WORKS TRANSLATED INTO ITALIAN

IL POETA ED IL PAPAGALLO	<i>Nuovissima, Roma</i>
RICORDI FANTASTICI	" "
NUOVI RICORDI	" "

WORKS WRITTEN IN ENGLISH

PERSONAL REMARKS ABOUT ENGLAND	<i>Librairie Dante, Verona</i> <i>(Out of Print)</i>
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WORKS TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH

FANTASTIC MEMORIES	<i>Doubleday, Doran & Co., New York</i>
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IN PREPARATION

LA SALIERE DE CRISTAL



MAURICE SANDOZ

The Maze

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SALVADOR DALI

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Preface

When I first decided to write this story, I suspected that English, Irish, and especially Scotch readers would be familiar with the plot. But later, during visits to the British Isles, I found that only a few people knew the answer to a mystery that had confounded seven generations of Britons.

Most people had heard of the old castle in the north of Scotland, but because of its remoteness among the moors, only a few knew where it actually was. Everyone agreed that the old castle was the scene of a famous mystery, but few knew the real solution.

Believers in the occult explained the mystery by supernatural causes, while rationalists offered long-winded, logical explanations that explained nothing. The majority, however, simply dismissed the mystery as insoluble.

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There was no use questioning the residents of the castle itself; neither masters nor servants could be induced to break an oath of silence.

No theory, however strange, could be stranger than the reality.

Although I had no personal part in the events that follow, I knew one of the principal witnesses intimately. It is her account that I transmit to my readers.

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THE MAZE



Chapter One

The Photograph Album

A few years ago the doctors ordered me to spend three months in the Swiss Alps. Although I obeyed reluctantly, I was later glad that I went. In those three months I gained a lasting friendship and heard an incredible but true story.

My friend, who told me the story, was an elderly lady staying at the same hotel as myself. The Scotch widow of an English officer, she had the refined character and simple manners common among British women of her class. I can still see the straight pleats of her black dress, the smooth band of her hair, like a pale gold border beneath her widow's cap. Her voice was serious, her hands gentle, and the scent of lavender and white roses floated about her. Having no children of her own, she developed an affection for me. She adopted me, took care of me,

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kept me company during the long hours of enforced rest. "Long" is only a manner of speaking; Mrs. Murray knew how to make the hours fly.

Like all Celts, she had a natural talent for storytelling. She spoke extemporaneously, without effort, guided by that dramatic instinct which is the essence of good narration. One day she questioned me about my own literary efforts.

"You want to write," she said. "Well, then, my child, I'll tell you a story you'll find hard to believe; but I assure you it's true. It actually happened. It is my own experience. One of the two ... persons"—she seemed to hesitate before finding the right word—"one of the two persons who played the main parts in this story is dead. The other won't mind my telling as long as I don't give his real name."

I was very young at the time. I hoped for a romantic love tragedy and was disappointed. I thought I was going to hear one of those traditional Scotch dramas of vengeance.

"It's about two men?" I asked.

Mrs. Murray had got up to arrange the folds of a curtain and didn't answer immediately.

“One of the two was a man,” she said at last.

The following evening, after dinner, she took me into the little parlor next to her bedroom.

I can still see it in detail. It reflected the taste of another nation and a bygone epoch. The lamp, covered by a large colored shade, cast a rosy light over the flowered

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slip covers on the convertible Morris chairs. Silver horns filled with flowers and pretty silver knickknacks, little baskets and miniature vases were scattered about the tables and whatnots. Among the vases and trinkets were photographs of people, monuments, and works of art.

Here in a Swiss hotel was what might have been a room in England or Scotland, what the British call a “cozy corner,” an inviting and comfortable retreat. It reminded me of the novels of Miss Edgeworth and Miss Austen (deciphered with the aid of a dictionary when I first started to read English).

But tonight I was to hear something far removed from the works of English lady novelists.

“I asked you here,” Mrs. Murray explained, “because this is a corner room, there is no one adjoining, and I won’t be overheard. I’m willing to have people read what I am about to tell you, but I don’t want others listening in. Sit down, my child.”

My adopted mother made me comfortable in an armchair, wrapped me in shawls, opened the window a mere crack so that we could not be overheard from the outside, and took a photograph album from the table.

“My friends make fun of me because I never travel without this album,” she said with a smile. “But, after all, old people can’t help becoming attached to mementos of the past, and when I travel with my album, I feel I am taking a bit of my past along with me.”

She handed me a photograph.

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“That’s Craven Castle. I think the photos were taken in secret by one of the guests. They’ll save me some long descriptions. As you see, the castle is shaped like a horseshoe; the main hall is two stories high. On the ground floor are the reception, billiard, and smoking rooms and the private

apartment of the baronet. Also the long gallery where the ancestral portraits look severely down on the guests.

“Portrait painters were rare in Scotland from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, and country gentlemen could not afford to have themselves painted. The McTeam gallery was an exception. All the ancestors of the family were duly represented, save the two last members of the older branch, Sir Charles and his wife, Lady Caroline, who was his first cousin.

“The baronets of the younger branch always explained that the couple, having no descendants, thought it useless to present their portraits to distant relatives.

“To get back to the castle: The guest rooms and rooms of the baronet’s personal servants are on the second floor. The rest of the help have rooms on the ground floor——”

“But I always thought servants lived in the attic, or, at any rate, on the top floor!” I interrupted, surprised.

“Yes, but at Craven things were done differently,” replied Mrs. Murray. “They had to be.”

She continued: “Here you see the court of honor and the steps leading to the hall. The right wing of the castle is half ruined, but the left tower still stands four stories high, re-enforced by iron supports.



“Look at this.” She pointed to the fourth floor of the tower. “Don’t you see something unusual?”

“It looks as if the tower had no windows.”

“You’re wrong. It has, or rather it used to have, but they’ve been stopped up.”

She showed me another photograph. "Now take a look at the castle seen from the other side. Observe the wall opposite the tower."

"I don't see anything out of the ordinary. But my eyesight isn't too keen."

Mrs. Murray passed me a magnifying glass.

"Now do you see?"

"The wall has no windows on this side."

"Are you quite sure?"

"Just a minute.... Yes, now I distinguish some almost imperceptible lines. Quadrangles. One, two ... six altogether. They look like fake windows. I've seen them in Italy, but I never expected to find them in Scotland."

"They are windows, but they've been blocked out. And now look at this."

The third picture was of an alley. The photographer had taken it at the point where it disappeared into a dark mass that I couldn't make out.

"Yew trees," explained Mrs. Murray. "They form a maze. This was planted in the eighteenth century when mazes were the rage in England and Scotland. You'll find others like it in more than one old park. But this one is by far the largest and most complex in Scotland. The baronet

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and a few of the servants were the only ones who could go through it without getting lost. They are said to have followed secret landmarks."

She paused. "The first time I wanted to try it, something prevented me."

Gifted storyteller that she was, she knew how to arouse my curiosity.

"Something? What?"

"A signpost."

"And the second time?"

"The second time, I attempted it at night," said Mrs. Murray with a shiver she did not try to conceal. "But someone forced me to leave."

"Someone forced you? Who?"

"An old friend."

She added: "I didn't go back to the place for a year."

"But what did you see then?" I burst out.

"A gravestone."

I gave the album a questioning look.

“I have nothing more to tell you about the castle for the moment. But if you care to see its present master, here he is with one of our mutual friends. I have a lot to tell you about both of them. I snapped them once as they were leaving my home.”

A rather large snapshot showed two men standing side by side in city clothes. The youngest, blond, slender, in his late twenties, was definitely Anglo-Saxon. His clear eyes and candid smile expressed his satisfaction in being a typical young Scotsman of the upper class, given to

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grouse shooting and salmon fishing, a loyal British subject and member of the Church of Scotland.

“That’s Sir Gerald McTeam. He hasn’t changed much! The other is Harry Seymour. They are close friends, despite their difference in age and character, or maybe because of it. Harry has always treated Gerald like a younger brother. The three of us have known each other from childhood.”

Harry Seymour must have been ten years older than Sir Gerald. Dark, thick-set, with an energetic chin and imperious eyebrows, he looked more like an Italian than an Englishman. He made me think of a Roman conqueror. Judging by his military posture, I took him to be an officer. I was not mistaken.

“A brave knight, Harry,” said my friend. “He loves to defend the weak.

“Here is the last photograph: my godchild. But it was taken ages ago.”

The last was the portrait of a young girl. I gazed at an almost childlike face framed in curls, and a smile that revealed dimples in the round cheeks. I could see the outlines of her neck through the severe, high collar of a thin blouse. It was a rather plump little neck, well made and gently filled out at the base like the throat of a pigeon. There are certain smiles, even in pictures, that one cannot help returning. I smiled back.

“Attractive, isn’t she?” commented Mrs. Murray. “And now that you know the principal characters and their background, I shall tell you their story. But first hand me

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my knitting from over there, will you? I lose the thread of my story without it.”

I shall not attempt to repeat the story in the words of the narrator. The art and charm of the spoken word cannot be rendered in writing. A number of

questions and digressions will have to be omitted, but I shall try to preserve the essentials of the story. I have merely modified the names of the castle and family threatened, for more than two centuries, by the strangest of curses.

Gerald and I are close relatives and I have known him from childhood (Mrs. Murray began). But I never saw him at the castle before he went there to live himself. One of the eccentricities of the baronet was that he never invited children, even his own nephews or nieces.

He did invite women, at rare intervals during the hunting season, but they were always amazons—I mean creatures who could ride, shoot, and weren't afraid of trifles. The younger women were always unmarried, widowed, or divorced; the older women were as often married as not.

Another oddity of the baronet's was that he never invited young women whose conduct or even appearance was not above suspicion, but he was quite indifferent to the behavior of the older women. An attitude which provoked endless comment. Why this puritanical strictness toward young women and limitless indulgence toward older women?

Moreover, most of the women guests cut short their



stay and refused to come back. They invariably said the castle made them feel ill at ease.

But the strangest thing about Craven was that the baronets never married. For two hundred years the heads of the younger branch had been bachelors. All except the first, and he lost his young wife in childbirth, a

year after his marriage. Until quite recently, the real cause of her death was kept secret.

So for two hundred years the estate was handed down from uncle to nephew. Everything always happened the same way. At his uncle's death the new baronet would leave for Craven, to enjoy a fine fortune, a beautiful castle, and an exceptionally rich library—the squires evidently read a lot to while away the hours of solitude. At rare intervals he would come home for a visit, each time more morose and saddened, a changed man. But usually he refused to leave Craven and would spend the rest of his life in the lonely old castle on the moors. When he died, his oldest nephew succeeded him and the whole thing would start all over again. Since the accession of the younger branch, the baronets have all died rather young.

Of course people tried to discover the reason for such strange behavior. They finally came to the conclusion that the family had developed a hereditary tendency toward melancholia and especially toward misogyny. They believed these morbid tendencies were intensified by the extremely desolate atmosphere of the castle and countryside.

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You ask me what prevented the McTeams from leaving the place. (Mrs. Murray put her knitting down and turned toward me.) My dear child, things have changed a lot in recent times. But twenty years ago a Scotch gentleman didn't leave his ancestral home. He accepted all the responsibilities of his rank, as he accepted the privileges. And if he should discover a terrible and shameful mystery, a secret that would put a blot on the family name (here the narrator seemed to speak very hurriedly), he guarded the secret. He assumed responsibility for it. And he stayed in his castle.

To come back to the story: Gerald accepted the current explanation of his great-uncles' behavior. He wasn't worried about his future heritage, but he didn't relish the idea of having to live in the castle. He told me his uncle had once invited him there to go grouse shooting. "I saw the old dump," he said irreverently. "It's as gay as a funeral."

"But isn't it supposed to be very beautiful?" I asked him.

Gerald made a face. "Yes ... possibly.... You know that sort of thing doesn't mean much to me. I'd prefer fewer battlements and more bathrooms. And then there's such a strange atmosphere in the place."

"What do you mean, strange?"

Gerald thought a moment. It seems there were contradictions everywhere, restrictions that no one could understand and no one explained. There was a door

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locked three times, a forbidden staircase, a barred alley, a condemned window. Gerald thought he had discovered the reason for these “showy antics,” as he called them. “I think Uncle Sam is hiding something—or someone—I mean some female—in that enormous building. You know he has not yet sown all his wild oats, the old devil! After all, there’s some excuse for him. Only in the end all these hiding places begin to get on my nerves.”

He paused and added lightly: “Do you know what I think? I wouldn’t be surprised if this were the mystery people talk about when they’ve exhausted other topics. The baronets simply could never find a girl of their own rank who would consent to live in that black hole. So they consoled themselves with their vassals in the customary fashion.”

This explanation contradicted the idea that the baronets were misogynists, but I didn’t care to discuss it.

“That explains why the guests are treated like little boys!” Gerald added.

“What do you mean, like little boys?”

“You have to follow rules as though you were still in boarding school. First of all, you aren’t allowed to climb the tower because the stairs are supposed to be dangerous. If they’re dangerous, why the devil don’t they have them repaired? And then you aren’t allowed to leave your room after eleven at night.”

“Come, come, Gerald!”

“And you have to keep your door locked at night. I

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swear it’s true, Cousin Edith. Uncle Samuel takes each guest aside and asks him very politely to conform to these three rules. ‘The only rules in the house,’ he adds.

“There’s nothing so surprising about it, for that matter. He and his lady friend simply prefer not to be seen going through the halls at those hours, that’s all!” he remarked, laughing.

While listening to this little lecture, I had been thinking.

“In that case, I understand why guests are asked not to leave their rooms after eleven. But why make them keep their doors locked?”

“Oh, just to remind them that orders are orders,” Gerald replied nonchalantly.

I risked a question that had been tantalizing me for some time. “And during your stay you heard nothing at night to arouse your suspicions?”

“Oh, you know I spent only five nights at Uncle Samuel’s, and I sleep like a log. And then the bedrooms don’t open directly on the hallway; the dressing rooms are in between. It seems the rooms were planned like that a long time ago. An odd arrangement, but it certainly prevents you from hearing what goes on in the hallway. Just the same—” Gerald stopped himself.

“Just the same, you heard something?”

“No, I didn’t, but my roommate, Fred Burnett, told me he did. He had forgotten to remove his false teeth, and he got up once toward midnight to put them in water. He said he heard footsteps in the hall, as if several

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people were walking together, and another peculiar sound.”

Gerald paused.

“Well? What was it?”

“Just a moment.... I want to be as accurate as possible, and this is a bit complicated.... Yes, now I remember. He said it was the sound a large heap of wet wash would make in falling on the ground. Fred is very precise. He told me it was repeated every ten to twenty seconds. The thing that struck him as most odd was that when the sound stopped, the footsteps continued, and when the sound began again, the footsteps stopped.

“The sounds continued to alternate like that on the staircase leading to the hall. Incidentally, the staircase is a queer construction. Then, little by little, they faded away. Fred took them to be the work of some practical jokers living in the castle. Maybe he was right. I should think anyone living there would have died of boredom without some form of distraction, no matter what.”

All this seemed quite possible. But one point bothered me.

“Tell me, Gerald, how could the baronets find female company if they never left the castle?”

Gerald shrugged as if to say: “Why spoil a beautiful theory with annoying questions?”

I didn't pursue the matter further, but I was more puzzled than ever. Did Uncle Samuel's house rules have something to do with the Craven mystery, or were they due to purely personal considerations? In order to find

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out, I would have to make an investigation covering two centuries. I had neither the means nor the desire to undertake such a task. Meanwhile it seemed most unlikely that all the McTeams, for two hundred years, had locked their guests in their rooms after eleven at night.

As for the heap of wash, it didn't interest me. I had not reached my age without learning that the strangest noises may arise from the most commonplace sources.

My cousin's voice interrupted my reflections.

"I haven't told you everything yet."

Evidently he was in a confidential mood. I admit I made the most of it.

"Look, Gerald, if you have something to say, say it. I may be invited to the castle someday. I want to be forewarned."

"All right then. Remember, I told you about a forbidden staircase in the tower. We were told not to use it because the stairs were unsafe. Well, Fred Burnett investigated for himself. The stairs are made of cut stone, as solid as can be! He went right up. The stairs merely led to a room lined with crowded bookshelves. Fred examined some of the books, works on agriculture and forestry published during the last two hundred years, in French, English, and German. Such a collection certainly doesn't deserve to be hidden so carefully and protected by a lie! I repeat, the staircase was perfectly solid. True, Fred didn't visit the whole tower. The door to the next room was locked.

"And that's not all there is to it."

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"What else is there?"

"Well, I don't think Uncle Sam was master in his own home."

I was going to protest. Uncle Sam, my second cousin, was an extremely strong-willed man. I recalled his gray, close-set eyes, his beaklike nose, his triangular, well-kept beard. The blood would rush to his face at the slightest contradiction. Gerald forestalled my protest.

"You would come to the same conclusion if you had lived at Craven. You know Uncle Samuel was always fussy about his comfort. He was

almost impossible to satisfy on that score. His servants in London and Edinburgh will testify to that! Yet he has made no changes in the castle. Its conveniences are still of the fifteenth century! How do you account for that? One day he took me to see the rose garden. There's a row of old oaks running the length of it. Uncle Sam is crazy about roses. He looked them over and suddenly shouted that he'd like to get rid of those infernal oaks that spoil his rose bushes. I asked him why he didn't. He grumbled in his beard that it would be a shame to cut down such venerable old trees and turned red as a boiled lobster. Then he said something through his teeth, something about tied hands and feet."

"He blushed?" I asked, surprised. "Why?"

"Because he wasn't telling the truth," Gerald replied bluntly. "I'm sure someone was preventing him from cutting down the oaks."

He paused, then added:

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"Nothing is ever changed at Craven, for that matter. I think the whole place is just as it was two hundred years ago, except for the rose garden. I wonder if all the baronets could have been misers. Yet the cottages of the tenants are well kept, comfortable, even modern. I can't understand it."

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Chapter Two

A Few Weeks Later

Other matters made me forget Craven for a while. But a few weeks later an unforeseen event brought it back to mind. The baronet suddenly died of an attack following a violent fit of temper. According to witnesses, a quarrel between Sir Samuel and one of the servants who refused to have certain changes made in the interior of the castle brought on the catastrophe. "I can't do it, sir," the servant had repeated obstinately.

I knew my young cousin well. He was incapable of standing solitude for long and little disposed to cope with it in the clandestine manner he attributed to Uncle Samuel. So I was not very surprised when he announced his intention of marrying as soon as possible. He told me he would have proposed sooner had his income been adequate. He had been in love with Kitty, my godchild, for two years, and he wanted me to tell her.

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"But why don't you tell her yourself?" I asked.

"If she turns me down," he said simply, "I'd rather find out from you."

I had no doubts as to the answer, and I went to tell Kitty, who lived near by. At first she gaped as if she didn't believe a word of it. Then she burst out sobbing that she was the happiest of mortals. (This is a woman's peculiar way of expressing great joy.) "He's been in love with you for two years," I told her, drying her eyes with my handkerchief.

"Two years!" she exclaimed. "I've been in love with him for four."

Everything was turning out for the best. But one thing bothered me. Kitty was the daughter of a first cousin as well as my godchild. I loved her dearly, and since the death of her parents I had taken care of her. I felt it my duty to remind her of the Craven mystery. She interrupted me at the first words, glowing with happiness, her eyes still wet.

"Oh," she said, "what difference can that make? When I'm with Gerald I'm afraid of nothing. And besides, who believes those old stories? It seems to me everyone has always lived in peace at the castle."

I am not a prude, I assure you. But I preferred not to say anything. It didn't seem appropriate to discuss with a young girl who had just become

engaged the death of a young woman in childbirth, the morbid behavior of several young men, and a mortal attack of rage. Besides, what could frighten or discourage a woman in love? I

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kissed my adopted daughter, invited the couple to dinner, and after the meal retired discreetly in the customary manner, with the excuse that I had letters to write.

Out of respect for convention, the wedding was postponed for two months. I had a chance to observe Kitty. After a week or so she began to worry me. An anxious shadow would pass over her face, so radiant at the beginning of her engagement. I asked her if she were ill. She answered that she was perfectly well, and I didn't say anything more about it.

As for Gerald, he was too much in love to notice anything amiss. He was so absorbed in his happiness that he even refused to go to Craven to receive the keys from the caretaker and take official possession of the estate.

"I, go there now!" he cried. "Why the devil should I? The butler can thank the lady who kept Uncle Sam company just as politely as I can. I'll be at Craven long enough when I go there to live with Kitty. I don't want to be alone in that old frog pond, even for one day!"

I often remembered these last words.

Of course Gerald was duly lectured about the difficulties involved in making a young woman feel at home in a six-hundred-year-old castle lived in exclusively by men. He ought at least to prepare her apartment.

This last consideration convinced him, and he left with the promise to write as soon as he arrived.

We received no news from him for the next two days, but this was not surprising. Train connections with the castle were infrequent. But after a week I began to worry

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—more about Kitty than Gerald. She hadn't uttered a single anxious or impatient word, but she refused to talk about her fiance and I didn't dare mention him to her. Her silence frightened me.

If there had been an accident, the newspapers or a telegram from some servant would have informed us immediately. Then what could have

happened? I was about to telegraph the butler and leave for Craven when, on the morning of the tenth day, the promised letter arrived.

It consisted of a mere ten or twelve lines asking me to tell Kitty that the engagement was off. No explanation was given. I was dumfounded. The message was written with the awkwardness of heavy emotion.

“I thought at first that I would be able to arrange things,” Gerald wrote. “God knows I’ve tried! But now I realize I can’t. It’s impossible.

“Tell Kitty I release her from the engagement, but that I will always be faithful to her, unless, perhaps, she marries someone else. Tell her that I can never marry her unless something happens that I haven’t even the right to hope for. Tell her that I am more unhappy than she is, because it’s true.”

Just the signature followed. The letter fell from my hands. I tried to think.

Secret liaison, illegitimate child, sudden insanity—all these suppositions vanished in the light of common sense. And how could I account for the remark, “unless something happens that I haven’t even the right to hope for?”

And I had to tell Kitty this brutal, stupefying news!

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My task was odious. I was about to telegraph Gerald to write her, but I thought better of it. Kitty came to see me every day. Unless she heard from Gerald, she would begin to worry and question me. There was no use lying to her. I would have to tell her sooner or later, and the longer I put it off, the harder it would be.

With a pounding heart and a choked feeling, I hurried to the dreaded interview. When I entered Kitty’s living room she was sitting near the window, and she looked at me without getting up.

“I saw you from a distance,” she said. “You have come to tell me that Gerald no longer wants to marry me.”

The interview was short. In a flat voice Kitty confided that a week before Gerald’s departure she began to receive some vaguely worded, anonymous letters warning her of the probable outcome of her engagement. She attributed the letters to some jealous woman. Too proud to question me, holding back the tears, she didn’t even want to read Gerald’s note. “It’s all over,” she snapped. “That’s all.”

When I got home I realized that Kitty had not been herself. She was usually the soul of gentleness, and it wasn’t like her to speak so sharply.

Her feminine vanity must have been dreadfully hurt. And no wonder!

I was indignant at Gerald's behavior. It seemed frivolous and outrageous. One simply doesn't propose marriage without first making sure that one can go through with it. By now the entire family, and all our friends and relatives, had read about the engagement in the papers.

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They would all find out that it had been called off. They would file through my living room, and perhaps through Kitty's, with sympathetic words and reassuring phrases. And some of the gossipy old aunts and female cousins would undoubtedly add a few indiscreet questions.

My only answer would be: "Kitty was let down. That's all I know and all she knows." And it would be the truth. Why hadn't Gerald explained?

Why? The question kept repeating itself, like a mosquito whining in my ear. In my irritation, I was about to destroy the letter, when I suddenly stopped, struck by the memory of some long-forgotten advice.

It was at a family reunion. One of my uncles, an old lawyer well versed in all the subtleties of the profession, had been talking about a criminal trial, a legal puzzle that all England was excited about at the time. The conversation led to a discussion of enigmatic letters. "If you should ever receive letters of this type," my uncle had said, turning to two or three young lawyers, "if you should ever receive letters of this type, don't burn them under the assumption that they are incomprehensible and useless. Lock them up. Then read them and reread them at leisure. Examine the handwriting. Study all the possible meanings of each word. You will rarely fail to find a clue. Why? Because such letters are usually conceived and written under the stress of emotion when a person is apt to betray himself in one way or another. Pay particular attention to what has been crossed out! A letter writer who has to cross things out is not completely master of

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himself. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, a blunder gives the writer away."

Something had been crossed out in Gerald's letter. I glanced over it to the last line: "... unless something happens that I haven't even the right to hope for." The crossed-out words followed.

Taking my uncle's advice, I began by examining the handwriting. It seemed less firm at this point, but that was to be expected. Something else

caught my attention. All the letters that preceded the crossed-out line were written in faded ink. All those that followed were strongly marked. Evidently the writer had refilled his pen after crossing out the words. But what had he used to cross them out with? The scratch had a peculiar leaden hue. Of course! A lead pencil.

In his excitement and haste, Gerald had taken the first pencil at hand to cross out the dangerous words and hadn't stopped to realize that the pencil mark was useless. "That's just like him," I thought, and went to get an eraser.

My hands were clammy with excitement. What would I discover?

Six words appeared one after another: "For it would be a death."

I think if someone had entered at that moment, he would have taken me for a statue of stupefaction. And I thought I was going to find the answer!

What could a death have to do with Gerald's marriage?

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I thought of a series of novels, popular in my youth. A secret marriage takes place. The bride, a diabolical character, disappears after a few months. She forges a death certificate that somehow or other gets to her husband. A year later she turns up again and creates a scandal by breaking into the church where the husband is about to be married again. Or (a variation dear to the hearts of feminine readers) she prowls at twilight around the cottage, or, better still, the castle, where the happy couple are spending their honeymoon and pays the newlyweds an unexpected visit.

Was Gerald the victim of this sort of trick?

Had the author of the anonymous letters won out? But in that case Gerald, who despised any kind of dissimulation, would have admitted it right away.

Then I realized I was getting confused. A husband or lover determined to repair his mistakes by marriage doesn't tell his ex-fiancee that he intends to remain faithful to her. Besides, Gerald was a man of honor. Despite his strange conduct, I knew him to be a gentleman. He would never have intimated that he wished for the death of a wife or mistress, no matter what he thought of her. His behavior had nothing to do with another woman. There must be some other explanation.

I thought of every possible reason—money troubles, bad health, and so on. But none of them had anything to do with a death.

I finally had to give up. It never occurred to me that

the explanation might involve something out of the ordinary.

(Mrs. Murray interrupted herself. "You've read a lot and you must know something about psychology.")

"A little, but I don't pretend to be an authority."

"At any rate, you must know about the work of the subconscious. At the most unexpected moments it will reveal what you have given up trying to figure out. I had changed my dress, given orders to the servants, arranged some papers, when I suddenly cried out: 'But of course, that's it!' ")

The Craven mystery. Gerald could not marry for the same reason that the other baronets could not marry. He was bound by the secret of Craven Castle.

The problem was clearly set. And it seemed more insoluble than ever. A death? Whose death? Had a hidden dynasty held the lords of Craven at its mercy for two hundred years? Had seven unknown generations been responsible for the lonely and sterile lives of seven men? The only baronet to defy the common law had been stricken through his wife and child. Why?

I am not easily frightened, but there was something nightmarish about this. Something diabolical was involved. Some sort of malediction.

I tried to collect my thoughts. I had discovered something that Gerald had never intended me to know. It would be dishonorable to speak of it to anyone—particularly Kitty. It would only frighten her. What was she thinking about now, poor girl, alone in an apartment that

had witnessed so much happiness and sorrow in so short a time?

This was no time for her to be alone. She must come and live with me. To begin with, she ought to be distracted. She needed a change of scene. We would leave England as soon as possible. I had made up my mind.

Two hours after breaking the bad news to Kitty, I was ringing her doorbell. She herself opened the door. Later she confided that in seeing me come back she thought for a moment that there had been a misunderstanding and that Gerald would return to her. At my first words she realized her mistake.

"Oh yes! Cousin Edith, take me away! I don't want to stay here! Take me away now. Take me far away!"

And this time she began to cry.

Chapter Three

Tempted by Curiosity

We left London at the end of March; we returned the following year, in September. During these eighteen months Kitty never spoke of Gerald or of the past. But, although she had several proposals, she refused them all.

One evening, in a hotel garden in Fiesole, overlooking Florence—a view that has brought peace to many troubled souls—she asked me when we would return to London.

“But whenever you like, my dear,” I answered, a little surprised. “As soon as I have telegraphed the servants that you are coming to live with me.”

Kitty was silent for a moment. Then she said in a dull voice: “Thank you, Cousin Edith. When do we start?”

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When we reached London I found two letters that had arrived the evening before. One, addressed to Kitty, was an invitation to spend two weeks in Devonshire with some friends. The other bore a Scotch stamp and was addressed in Gerald’s handwriting.

So far Gerald had merely sent me the usual Christmas card. But a few months earlier Harry Seymour had written me. Men do not jump at conclusions as women do. Harry wrote that during a business trip in the north of Scotland he had discovered extenuating circumstances regarding Gerald’s behavior. One morning he had paid Craven Castle an unexpected visit. Gerald had received him politely enough and had asked him to stay to lunch (Gerald had no choice in the matter). But when his old friend arose to leave, he didn’t ask Harry for the night or insist that he stay longer. “He seemed constrained and anxious,” wrote Harry, “and, what was most unlike him, nervous. Any sudden noise, no matter how slight, worried him. The conversation was limited to small talk. Our former close friendship was clearly a thing of the past. It’s very sad. I wonder what could have happened to change him to such an extent. The silly traditional explanations are no help at all.”

A postscript added: "There are strange, inexplicable things going on in that house."

I kept the letter. It removed whatever resentment I still felt against Gerald. The thought of him, once so gay, now sad and alone with his secret, would have disarmed a more unforgiving person than myself.

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Whatever Gerald now had to say, I would answer him. But what had he written? Excuses? Reproaches? I was haunted by the crossed-out words in his last message. Was I about to discover what they meant?

I was very excited as I opened the envelope. The first lines surprised me greatly.

Gerald was inviting me to spend a few days at Craven to go grouse shooting. "I haven't forgotten that you like to hunt," he wrote. "Hairy Seymour and a few people you know will be there. I hope you will not disappoint me by refusing."

The veiled allusion to my silence touched me. Poor boy! Evidently he couldn't stand being alone any longer. He wanted companionship, a little gaiety for a change, some hunting parties with a few friends. But why had he refused to see anyone for eighteen months? What had prevented him from inviting people before?

Perhaps he had wanted to avoid any awkwardness that might arise at first from his inexperience as squire and guardian of the Craven mystery. And who knows? Maybe the mystery had been solved. Maybe Gerald wanted to take up with Kitty again. Maybe he had succeeded in "arranging things," as he put it. Or perhaps he merely wanted to confide in me.

I am certainly not the type of woman who listens at doors and goes through other people's bureau drawers. There is nothing wrong in examining evidence that has been freely given and drawing conclusions from it. But the idea of exploiting the hospitality of my host to discover

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something he wanted to hide would simply have made me indignant.

But alas! Since the Garden of Eden, more than one daughter of Eve has succumbed to curiosity.

I looked at the back of Gerald's letter. He had the habit of scribbling unexpected postscripts on the other side of a page after he had formally

ended the letter on one side. It was lucky that I did! The other side contained this utterly unconventional request:

“Please don’t bring your lady’s maid. You will be provided with one at the castle.”

“That,” I said aloud, “is going a bit too far!”

The following day Kitty left for Devonshire in a happy mood. In parting she kissed me affectionately and reminded me to write.

The next morning I boarded the train for Scotland. I was impatient and eager to get to Craven. I was not merely looking forward to seeing Gerald again or ensuring Kitty’s happiness. Above all, I am ashamed to confess, I was tempted by curiosity.

Chapter Four

Fifteen Years Ago

For two centuries the baronets of Craven had carried on a bitter war against anything that might facilitate communications between the castle and the surrounding country. Fifteen years ago guests were usually driven from the station in a dilapidated old coach that bounced along across the fields for two or three hours. After a whole day on the train, I didn't relish this prospect, but when I reached my destination, I was reassured. A car was waiting at the lonely station and a man of uncertain age was looking over the few passengers who got off the train. He approached, took off his hat, and inquired if I were the lady expected at the castle.

"Yes, I am Mrs. Murray," I replied.

I saw him glance rapidly at the initials on my traveling bag. I didn't know that anyone, even a Scotsman, could be so suspicious!

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"Those are my bags," I said, pointing to two suitcases a porter had put down beside me.

A second glance reassured him that the latter bore the right tags and initials. I was no doubt dealing with a trustworthy old family retainer. He turned out to be a very good chauffeur.

For about an hour the car sped smoothly across marshy lowlands, over rock-strewn moors, sometimes through a forest. It was a desolate country, under an endless sky. Along the horizon the sea was a monotonous gray line, the color of lead. The melancholy of the landscape made me catch my breath.

The sight of distant battlements and weather vanes, rising above thick green foliage touched here and there with the yellow and red of autumn, was a relief. We soon came to the estate walls which stand seven feet high. The wrought-iron gate was held open for us by two bare-headed men.

In Scotland gates of inhabited estates are always left open. But we had barely passed this one before it closed behind us with a grinding and clanking of locks and chains. The car proceeded noiselessly under the leafy

dome of an avenue of beech trees; then, grating on the gravel, it turned a sharp corner.

The castle loomed before me in the clear northern twilight. Black with ivy, it was a cluster of roofs, walls, dungeons, towers, and watchtowers flanked by ancient trees and an old-fashioned formal garden, which was a charming copy of a French original. Stone jars filled with

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brilliant fall flowers were reflected in the water of marble basins. The spray of a fountain in the center was a shower of brightness against the fading light of day.

A man was standing on the stoop. He ran down two steps at a time to greet me.

“Thank you for coming, Cousin Edith. Leave your bags here. I’ll take care of them. You aren’t too tired? May I offer you anything? No? Then I’ll show you to your room myself.”

As soon as I saw him I realized that Gerald had never felt the slightest sense of guilt. But I noticed that he had aged four or five years in the past eighteen months. He had developed a habit of frowning suddenly, as though to suppress a bothersome thought, and a permanent wrinkle had resulted between his brows. He wore the rather set expression of elderly people who have come to realize that life has no more changes in store for them.

I had left a boy; I found a man. Gerald had gone through the hard school of lonely, continuous, unmitigated suffering. And his broken engagement was not the only cause of his sorrow. Would I learn the whole truth before leaving Craven? What had happened in this castle, built to house a hundred people, yet for two hundred years inhabited only by a bachelor and a few servants?

“This is the hall,” said Gerald as we entered.

The high-ceilinged room, which could easily have held twenty-five people, was dark and deserted. No doubt the guests were dressing for dinner. I looked about me curiously.

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At that time central heating and electricity had been adopted everywhere, but here they seemed unheard of. The fire crackled sporadically, as if reluctant to gnaw the logs piled up in the grate. In bad weather the enormous medieval fireplace must have given off more draft

and smoke than heat. A shower of crystal descended from three candelabras suspended between the smoky beams of the ceiling. Each flare from the fireplace was flashed by the facets of crystal into the darkness along the woodwork, where the surly head of a wild boar would appear for a moment, or the dead eyes of a doc. Really, Uncle Samuel had been quite right not to invite nervous women to the castle!

I was going to say as much to Gerald when the staircase caught my eye. I knew enough about architecture to see that it was about two hundred years old and that the wrought-iron banisters were twice that old. Evidently the staircase had been remodeled two hundred years ago. But what struck me most was its queer construction. The steps were about a yard and a half wide and ten inches high, like a series of platforms leading to the second floor.

“These steps must be very convenient for little children or porters,” I said, mounting the first platform.

Gerald didn’t answer. I felt somehow humiliated, as though I had made a break, and decided to refrain from further comments about the castle. We reached the landing in silence.

The noise of baths announced the approach of dinner.

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And now you will excuse a few topographical details, necessary to the understanding of my story.

Two old-fashioned oil lamps on two carved side tables threw a vague light into an exceptionally wide corridor, built entirely of stone. Along the top of one wall, horizontal slits admitted the daylight. The wall had been made higher and the windows partly blinded, so that nothing that went on within could be seen from the outside and vice versa. I could see that these changes had been made at about the same time the staircase was rebuilt. Look at the photograph: You’ll see the high wall and the blinded windows.

At the end of the corridor, reinforced by ironwork and furnished with huge bolts, was a massive door. The key must have been of unusual size to fit the giant keyhole. A good housekeeper would have noticed that the hinges, bolts, and lock had all been scrupulously oiled and greased, so that the door could be opened and closed easily and noiselessly.

Finally, on the right, was the row of dressing rooms through which one passed to reach the bedrooms. The latter all overlooked the garden.

(Mrs. Murray interrupted herself. "Have you ever been in an old Scotch castle?" she asked.

"No, I have never been in Scotland."

"Well, if you ever go there and visit our old baronial halls, you will be astonished at the small number of carpets. Perhaps it would be a mistake to cover the beautiful, polished hardwood floors. Be that as it may, the

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only floor covering to be found anywhere, even in the most luxurious castles, is the small bedside rug in each bedroom.")

When I saw the floor of the corridor I nearly made another break. A carpet covered the whole of it, from one end to the other. Even stranger than its presence and unusual thickness were its material and color. It was made of a rubbery, waterproof fabric. The shade, as far as I could make out, was an ugly mixture of dirty brown and gray-green, against which traces of mud and slime were barely visible.

"A practical color, in this marshy country," I thought to myself.

Gerald opened the second door on the right. "Here is your dressing room, Cousin Edith. You'll find your bags in your room. Dinner will be announced in half an hour. One more thing: I must remind you that Uncle Samuel's three house rules are still in force."

He disappeared without giving me a chance to answer. The remark about the house rules didn't surprise me. I had felt it coming. But it was strangely distasteful to me. Then I realized that I was beginning to develop an antipathy to the corridor, and to get away from it I entered my dressing room.

In the darkest corner of the room the candles, in two heavy silver candlesticks, threw their sparse light on an outmoded washstand. A round, old-fashioned tub, flanked by pitchers of hot and cold water, took the place of a bathtub. In the half-darkness I saw something shiny

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on the washstand: a hand mirror. It was a small round affair, in a carved bronze frame, covered with cupids and roses. It would have delighted an antique lover, but it was not much use to me. It was so small I could hardly see if my hair was in order. As for judging how I was dressed, it was out of the question.

Perhaps, I thought, there would be a wall or bureau mirror in my bedroom. I went to look, but on the threshold I saw that my hopes had been in vain. The walls and ceiling were of unbroken oak paneling, which gave the room a gloomy tone. I found it very depressing, accustomed as I was to the gay chintzes and lacquered furniture of English country houses.

At the left the bed was concealed in an alcove behind dark draperies. The floor was bare except for a narrow, worn bedside rug. At the right two enormous, bulging antique bureaus framed an impressive fireplace. In the center five or six faded shabby armchairs scattered around an inlaid table seemed to await the ghosts of another age. An obviously inexperienced hand had placed a glass, a pitcher of water, a flask of brandy, and a lemon on the table. A fire had been lit. The smell of burning logs mixed with the musty odor of long-uninhabited, unaired rooms. Was there no housekeeper in the castle?

Gerald was not given to luxury, but he had always liked comfort. Why did he neglect the comfort of his guests? I knew him to be generous. What did he do with his income? There wasn't even a telephone in the castle. Since my arrival I had looked for one in vain. (I learned

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later that there were three: two of them, one at the caretaker's and one at the butler's, communicated; the third was never mentioned.)

As I gazed at the scratched floor and woodwork, the antique fireplace, the worn furniture, the lighting of another era, a thought came to me: "Perhaps Gerald is afraid to let workmen into the house." I had no time to pursue the idea. The sound of baths had ceased. Doors opened and closed along the corridor. A rustling noise, dampened by the thickness of rubbery material, passed my door, and a woman's voice called out: "Very well, Colonel, since you're here, you can be my bodyguard. Really, I'm afraid I might be followed by a ghost!"

I dressed rapidly that evening. In less time than I thought possible I was back in the corridor. A lamp had just gone out. I was alone in the darkness and the silence.

And now I must confess something that won't give you a very high opinion of me, I'm afraid. When I reached the staircase I turned around. Who did I think was following me? What? I didn't know.

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Chapter Five

Something Passes Down the Hallway

The guests were assembled in the great hall. They were all members of my social circle. The two women were both excellent horsewomen, unmarried, of irreproachable behavior. (Evidently the tradition regarding the type of women invited to the castle was still upheld.) The four men guests were all bachelors. Three of them were just nice boys, healthy young animals who liked good food and wine, hunting and adventure. Simple souls, they loved life as they conceived it, as long as it didn't force them to think. When by chance it did make them think they ceased to love it. But this was seldom for more than a few seconds. The fourth was Harry Seymour. I was relieved to have him for my neighbor at table.

I have forgotten almost everything about the dinner itself. I recall that the wines were extremely heady, but the menu, the table decorations, the attire of the women,

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escape me. The rest, however, is still vivid in my mind.

I can see the long, oak-paneled dining room in the flickering light of the candelabra; The butler, a man of about sixty who had served the last two masters, looked surprisingly like a McTeam as he stood impassive behind his master. The four liveried footmen, with their rosy stolid faces, also bore a striking resemblance to the McTeams. Harry and Gerald, in evening clothes, were handsomer than ever. I was watching Gerald, animated, high-colored, almost gay, when all at once I felt the almost psychic shock of an intuition.

Gerald's gaiety concealed a worry. The impassivity of the four menservants was a mask. Underneath they were thinking of something else—of one and the same thing. Between these five men, master and servants, there was a secret understanding, a hidden bond.

Gerald raised his head and listened for a moment. A slight noise, the creaking of a plank or the fall of an object, was heard on the floor above. At an almost imperceptible sign from the butler, one of the footmen moved

nearer the door. All the servants saw their master's gesture, and none was surprised by it.

Gerald took up the conversation again, almost immediately. I think Harry Seymour and myself were the only guests who noticed what had happened. Harry made some casual inquiry about tomorrow's hunt, and from then on no one thought of anything else.

After dinner the women proceeded to the drawing room, where, according to the English custom, they



were joined a little later by the men. But the evening was short. We were all tired from hunting or traveling, and our host didn't try to retain us. A servant handed each of us a huge candlestick bearing the Craven coat of arms, and we climbed the platforms of the staircase in silence. A

newcomer, unfamiliar with the ways of the castle, would have thought our procession, the staircase included, a strange spectacle.

We wished one another a hurried good night on the landing. Doors were closed and obediently locked. Harry had managed to find himself alone with me outside our respective doors.

“Edith,” he said reassuringly, “you see we are neighbors. If by chance you should be frightened during the night, knock on the communicating door. It is locked only on your side.”

He went into his room without waiting for an answer, and I heard him lock his door.

I went into my room, forgetting completely what I ought to have remembered; instead of undressing, I sat down in the nearest armchair. In the yellow, flickering candlelight that sent the shadows dancing along the walls I began to reflect again. So this was the mystery of Craven Castle! What was it all about?

To lock one’s door at night is an accepted convention. No host in a civilized country would think of mentioning this precaution to his guests, and certainly not with such insistence.

The words came back to me: “... unless something

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happens that I haven’t even the right to hope for ... for it would be a death.”

Was a living creature, a human being, hidden near the castle or in the castle itself? I began to feel really frightened. Was Gerald keeping a lunatic in some isolated room? A sleepwalker? Some old retainer? Or, who knows, a member of his family? I had heard of similar cases. I had once come in contact with a lunatic, and I didn’t want to repeat the experience....

I don’t think I am more cowardly than most people, but I admit that this idea was especially disagreeable to me. After all, there were asylums, places where these poor creatures were housed and well treated, well cared for! Why was it necessary to keep them at home? But if it was a question of a father ... a mother ...

But how foolish of me! I had forgotten that the mystery was two hundred years old. One hundred and seventy-five to be exact. Could a series of lunatics have been concealed in the castle all that time? Perhaps the victims of a hereditary taint were guarded by relatives out of charity, or, more likely, out of family pride.

I was about to accept this theory, when it crumbled like all the others. It explained neither the oath of silence nor the breaking of an engagement.

All my suppositions, all the reasons I could think of, had been countered by simple common sense. A last question, evolved in my subconscious, took form:

Why was this rule, in force for two centuries, limited to the hours of night?

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A clock struck eleven. Behind the communicating door I heard Harry's voice:

"Edith, have you locked your doors?"

"Oh! How absent-minded of me! Not yet."

"Well, lock them!"

And I obeyed.

One or two hours later I awoke for a few seconds as one awakes from the sleep of exhaustion. In the corner of the room, level with the floor, a ray of light pierced the darkness. Harry Seymour was still awake.

I went back to sleep soundly enough not to realize that a door had been opened ever so cautiously at one end of the corridor and closed at the other, and that something had passed down the hallway.

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Chapter Six

An Unusual Occurrence

I always wake up early after a trip. I couldn't say how long I had slept when I opened my eyes. The room was still dark behind the curtains, which had been drawn the evening before by my temporary maid. The light had gone out in Harry's room.

When visiting, I like to be punctual. As you probably know, the English, unlike the French, do not take breakfast alone in their rooms, but together in the dining room. I didn't want to be late and wondered what time it was.

I did what Fred Burnett had done: I went into the dressing room. Not to put my false teeth away (fortunately I have no use for them), but to find my watch which I had left on the washstand. Candle in hand, I tiptoed into the next room to get it.

The hands pointed to five o'clock. I could go back to sleep again. But instead of returning to my room, I took a step toward the door. I heard a muffled, continuous noise passing down the hallway, a sort of rubbing and swishing. Experienced homeowners will tell you that they can often identify a noise as soon as they hear it.

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I didn't have to look to know that two servants were brushing and sweeping the carpet. This was surprising. We had all changed to clean shoes for dinner, and by the light of seven candles I had seen that the carpet was immaculate when we retired. But I didn't wonder about it for long, it didn't seem important one way or the other. I went back to sleep for the third time. Our host's wines certainly made me sleep soundly.

I filed into the dining room with the others. Breakfast passed smoothly enough. But I noticed that Gerald looked tired and repressed an occasional yawn. As he had been in good form the evening before, I concluded that he had had a bad night. Harry, always self-possessed, always polite, kept up the conversation. I knew him well enough to see that he was suppressing a secret worry. He had not been worried last evening. What could have happened between eleven at night and nine in the morning?

After breakfast we all scattered, availing ourselves of the perfect independence which guests of an English household enjoy. One of the women guests waited for me at the dining-room door and motioned me to join her.

Margaret (her first name is sufficient) was a vigorous woman of forty-five, whose hair was just starting to turn gray. It was her boast that she had never in all her life consulted a doctor. Besides being an excellent hunter and an exceptionally good shot, she was a highly educated woman. She had a doctor's degree in natural

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science. She was more interested in plants and the so-called "lower" animals than in human beings.

"I have made a discovery," she said, climbing the stairs. "No, not on that side." She pulled me toward the darker side of the corridor along the inner wall.

"What have you discovered?" I asked, surprised.

"You'll find out in good time," was all she replied. "If you had continued along that wall, you would have seen it yourself. But I want you to see what's in my room first."

Intrigued by this beginning, I entered a room that might have been a duplicate of mine. My companion went straight to one of the bulging bureaus, opened a drawer containing some personal linen, four packages of cigarettes, a treatise on the reproduction of eels, and a little paper parcel.

She opened the parcel and showed me its contents: a dried flower falling apart.

"Do you know what it is?" asked Margaret.

"It looks like an ordinary aquatic plant, a flower that grows in marshes," I replied without enthusiasm.

"Never in marshes," answered the naturalist. "This flower grows only in fresh-water ponds or running brooks.

"And what is this?" she pointed to a dead insect, a sort of dragonfly.

"It's an insect," I answered flatly.

Margaret burst out laughing.

"It's obviously a hemipter, the——" She pronounced

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a Greek or Latin name. "It was stuck to the flower. It likewise Eves only near fresh-water ponds. Do you know where I found them?"

"On one of your walks, I suppose," I replied, wondering what she was driving at.

"I found it this morning, over there." She pointed with her chin. "When I crossed the corridor. I was trying to find out if it were possible to see outside by standing on a chair. It isn't."

Margaret wrapped the flower and insect up again and put them back in the drawer.

"And now come and see my other discovery," she said, taking my arm.

She opened the corridor door and looked out. "We are alone," she said. "They are all either in the smoking room, in the billiard room, or on the golf course."

Without releasing my arm, she made me cross the width of the corridor, then stopped.

Now imagine for a moment that a line divided the corridor lengthwise into two equal parts. The point at which we stood was beyond this line, that is, near the wall opposite the bedrooms.

"Look at the floor," Margaret said.

A greenish-brown spot, about the size of the palm of a very large hand, could be seen on the carpet. It had apparently escaped the notice of the two servants who had swept the corridor at five in the morning. I wondered why they had done their cleaning before it was light enough to see.

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"It's mud," I said. "It isn't dry yet."

"It's slime," Margaret corrected me. "And that type of slime is found only in the fresh-water ponds of this region. Are you familiar with the countryside?"

"Well, I am. I came here quite often in Uncle Samuel's time. It bored me to walk in the grounds; there are no insects. So I walked and rode about the countryside. In the immediate vicinity of the castle there are marshes, but no ponds. The nearest pond is five miles away. How do you account for the slime?"

She paused. As I didn't answer, she continued:

"It's simple enough. One of our gentlemen friends here dashes about the woods at night. He comes back with slime from the banks of ponds stuck to

the soles of his boots. And where do you usually walk in a corridor? In the middle or along the walls?"

She didn't wait for my answer.

"Whoever passed this spot last night walked as far as possible from our rooms because he didn't want to be heard or seen."

"But what could he hunt at night?" I asked. "Screech owls, or ... bats?"

Margaret only smiled, gave me a friendly slap on the shoulder, and started downstairs humming in a deep voice:

*"Will you follow me, my pretty girl,
Will you follow me to Aberfeldee?"*

Then she stopped and called back:



“It remains to be seen who the gentleman is. Try to find out, if it amuses you. I’m not interested. But it certainly accounts for a lot of the nonsense around here!”

The theory of the nocturnal woodsman was acceptable enough. But, like all the others, it provoked new questions. If the gentleman were afraid to be

seen or heard, why didn't he use the back stairs where no one could possibly see or hear him? Besides, the spot didn't look as if it came from a boot or shoe. It was worth examining more closely.

I got down on my knees to see better. A delicate network of fibers showed up, clear cut and graceful. "It's the impression of a maple or plane-tree leaf," I thought. "The leaf must have stuck to the sole of the shoe."

I was going to continue the examination, when footsteps and voices sounded in the hall and grew louder. Two servants were climbing the stairs. I didn't care to be caught indulging my curiosity and fled to my room before I could be seen.

Just as I was shutting my door I heard an oath, in a restrained voice, tense with rage and fear:

"Jim! Jim! Confounded idiot! Blockhead! Look what you have left there! If Sir Gerald sees it, we'll both be scolded!"

"Scolded for a spot of mud!" protested the invisible culprit.

The first voice replied even lower, but with the same intensity: "No one gives a damn about the spot, but didn't you see its shape?"

Chapter Seven

One More Strange Observation

The following days were devoted to hunting. As we all loved it and the weather was beautiful, no one thought of complaining, least of all Gerald.

In the woods or on the moors he relaxed. He was almost happy again. But as soon as we started for home his face would darken. Each time he entered the door he and the butler exchanged a glance. The butler seemed to say: "Everything is all right, sir, don't worry." Harry and I were the only ones to notice it.

During my stay at the castle certain unusual regulations regarding the staff came to my notice. First of all, the limited number of house servants. There were only seven or eight servants living in the castle itself. Besides the butler, Robert McTeam, and the four footmen, there was a chef, Robert's nephew. Their rooms were on the

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ground floor, opposite the guest rooms on the floor above. At that time, in Scotland, a man of Gerald's rank and fortune kept at least a dozen house servants, not counting the valet or chambermaid who accompanied each of the guests. But the guests were always asked not to bring their personal servants and always came alone. I learned later that this had been the custom since the accession of the younger branch.

The other servants, gardeners, grooms, and stableboys, lived either at the farmhouse or in a distant outbuilding. The caretaker and his wife lived in a cottage at the entrance to the grounds.

Another strange thing about the staff was that no women servants lived in the castle itself and none were even allowed to spend the night there. I learned that whenever one of the house servants married, he went to live with his wife at some distance outside the castle grounds. He was free to go on serving at the castle during the day or to find some other work on the grounds. Every day the caretaker's wife, Catherine, went to the castle in place of a housekeeper, but she always returned home at night. When there were women guests at Craven they were waited on by the wives and

daughters of house servants. But the temporary maids never spent the night at the castle. The staff seemed to accept these unusual regulations.

I noticed that four menservants, besides the regular house servants, frequented Craven Castle. That is, they ate at the castle. As soon as the meal was over, they disappeared.

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I never saw all four together; they seemed to come in relays, two at a time. No one knew where they came from or where they went. It was said that they did the heavy work, but they were all old men, and I never saw them doing work of any kind. No, I'm mistaken, I did see them work once.

But I think the most surprising thing about the staff was that men and women, temporary or permanent help, from the butler to the groom, from the housekeeper to the last scullery maid, all belonged to the McTeam clan. For one hundred and seventy-five years no servant not a McTeam was ever admitted to the castle.

All this was strange enough. But even stranger was the look on the faces of the permanent house servants. Although I am familiar with old families and devoted retainers, I have never seen such determined impassivity on the face of a servant. It was the expression of men who carry a continuous responsibility and take a certain pride in it.

I was most preoccupied over Gerald. With his guests he was invariably gay and attentive, an accomplished host. But old friends like Harry and myself were not fooled by his manner. I had studied him more than once without his being aware of it. Whenever he thought himself alone and unobserved, his face fell and he seemed to sink into a black mood.

That's not all. Remember I told you he had stopped to listen to something during my first dinner at the castle? Well, this happened again. During dinner a slight sound

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seemed to worry, even frighten him. After a few seconds he returned to the conversation. Once he started to raise his hand to impose silence, but checked himself. Two or three days later he shuddered at a momentary sound on the floor above. Each time the butler stiffened and one of the footmen moved toward the door opening on the monumental staircase.

A second door gave access to a steep, narrow, little staircase with high steps. Like the main staircase, it led to the first floor. But the servants never

approached it.

I noticed something else about Gerald. Whether seated or standing, he avoided, when possible, turning his back to a door. The servants were aware of this. When they brought him a chair they placed it with its back to a wall or in a corner, where he could take in at a glance all the doors and windows of the room. Gerald seemed to be afraid that someone would come in behind him through a door or window.

Another thing I noticed was Gerald's secretiveness about the most trivial and ordinary matters. One day I saw him take a package from the postman and rush to his room with it. I heard him lock his door. At that time my eyesight was as good as my hearing. I noticed that the package bore a French stamp and the name of a Paris publishing house, known for the diversity of its publications. Was Gerald reading a French novel so improper that he had to hide it? That wasn't like him. Then why was he hiding it?

Every day a new question arose that made the problem

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more insoluble. Remember I told you how Gerald tried to get Uncle Samuel to cut down the oaks that were spoiling the roses? He also suggested to Uncle Sam, with as little success, that a thicket blocking a view of the sea be cleared. The day after my arrival I went for a walk in the grounds. I noticed that the oaks were still there, shading the rose bushes, and that a dense thicket continued to block the only possible view of the sea from the gardens.

One evening, in my room, I made a mental list of all the contradictions between my cousin's character and his conduct, between his tastes and his way of life, his desires and his actions. Gerald was generous. He had what is known as family spirit. Yet he neglected to renovate or even keep up the ancestral home. He liked comfort. Yet he lived in a badly lit, inadequately heated, old castle that was not even well kept. He was the most sociable of men, yet he invited only a few friends for ten days a year, never longer. He loved flowers and allowed the oaks to kill a quarter of his rose bushes; he loved distant horizons and allowed thickets to shut out the view. He had always been impulsively frank, and now he was secretive. Finally, all who knew him agreed that he had never been frightened by anything, and now he was afraid. Of what?

You ask me what the other guests thought of all this?

(Mrs. Murray stopped to remember.)

I don't think the men, except Harry, thought about it much one way or the other. At table they were too much absorbed by the food and wine and stories of hunting or

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war to notice what went on around them. They had seen too many strange things all over the world to be interested in a few oddities at Craven. They were content to agree with Major Powell.

“All those poor devils,” he had said, referring to the baronets of Craven, “were neurotics. And no wonder! If I had to live in a country like this, I’d hang myself on the park gate within six weeks. Besides, everyone knows that these Celts see ghosts everywhere.”

Margaret, more observant, but hardly more enlightened, had a theory of her own. The unmarried servants had mistresses somewhere on the estate or in the neighborhood. The benevolent squire facilitated these amorous encounters. “And what could be more natural?” Margaret added. She had a great contempt for narrow ideas.

But her friend Ellie King and myself were not satisfied with this theory. Like all the explanations offered so far, it only provoked a new question. Why would the servants, returning from their rendezvous, cross the corridor instead of using the back stairs?

Harry kept his opinion to himself. But almost every time I woke up at night I saw a light under his door. I was convinced that he was both avoiding and observing Ellie, Margaret, and myself.

All this made me feel constantly ill at ease. I was under a nervous strain for the first time in my life.

Margaret was the only woman guest who didn’t feel the strain. She believed in her theory. Besides, I don’t think she was capable of feeling nervous about anything.

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As for Ellie King, she was preparing to leave the castle. One evening she came into my room. She was draped in a pale blue dressing gown which brought out the color of her stubbornly dyed blonde hair, her limpid blue eyes, and long white hands, all that remained of her former “romantic” beauty.

She told me she slept lightly and that she had been awakened twice by a noise in the middle of the night. It seemed to approach along a side alley on the grounds, then fade away rapidly. Two hours later she heard it again, coming back in the opposite direction.

The second time she heard the noise Ellie put out her candle, so that she couldn’t be seen, and looked out the window. Then she saw something so

strange she nearly cried out.

A coach was passing, close to the castle, “a real coach drawn by two horses, like the ones in museums,” she said. In the light of the lanterns she saw the coachman, whom she recognized as the chauffeur, but she couldn’t see anyone else through the thick curtains stretched over the windows. The wheels and horses, hoofs made hardly any noise. They must have been covered with rubber or some special material. Ellie said that only an extremely light sleeper with unusually keen hearing would have heard anything.

“Is that all you noticed?” I asked, wondering if she were quite sane.

“No,” she said. “There was something else. You know my room is the last on the corridor. As the coach was

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turning the corner of the castle someone gave an order to the coachman, and I recognized your cousin’s voice. But he wasn’t alone inside. I heard ...”

She hesitated. Then she said:

“I heard a noise, a sound. It was a voice. And yet it wasn’t a voice. That’s what frightened me.”

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Chapter Eight

The Man Who Comes Back at Night

The unwonted, the inexplicable was not confined to the castle and grounds.

It was generally believed that the baronets of Craven Castle were all incompetent in administrative and agricultural matters. The baronets of the older branch spent all their time at war or fighting with their neighbors. They allowed their lands and tenants' cottages to go to ruin. The vassals were housed no better than the cattle. The heads of the younger branch were less bellicose. They were considered great readers and visionaries. But it was said that they, too, neglected their domain, that almost all of them lived in town and visited the estate as seldom as possible. Sir Samuel was remembered as a man who did only what was indispensable to the upkeep of Craven, and that grudgingly.

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The facts contradicted these reports. I accompanied Margaret on several of her scientific explorations around the estate. A few botanical, geological, and archaeological observations led us to certain conclusions. We observed that the land, now covered with forests, was formerly barren of trees, that the fields, rich with barley or oats, produced nothing two hundred years ago. Margaret pointed out the age of the trees, the nature of the soil. "Those beech trees were planted one hundred and fifty years ago," she said. "I didn't know the baronets took such an interest in trees. Look at those fields! It's hard to believe they are drained marshes. The lords of Craven must have been authorities on agriculture and forestry. I saw the last harvest. It was magnificent. I had no idea your cousin knew so much about farming!"

The baronets of the younger branch were not only excellent farmers, the village was a model of its kind. The farmhouses and tenants' cottages were well constructed, well kept up, and comfortable. Some of the cottages, unlike the castle, were even equipped with running water and electricity. Traces of old and recent repairs on the roofs, chimneys, or windows revealed the progress of one hundred and eighty years. There were no traces of previous repairs. They all appeared after the same date: the fatal

date of the accession of the younger branch, marked by the death of a woman and a child.

I wondered why the servants always referred to the baronet as “Sir Gerald,” rather than “the Master,” in the customary manner.

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One day, shortly before I left, we stopped an old laborer at the edge of his field and started to talk with him. His ruddy, gaunt face and high cheekbones, his suspicious, questioning eyes, made him a type of the region. As long as we spoke English to him, he answered in monosyllables, but when I addressed him in Gaelic, he became communicative.

“Do you see those fields?” he said, pointing to recently harvested land. “My great-grandfather told my father that when he was young they were nothing but mud and reeds. There were no trees anywhere. What little was harvested went to the lords of the manor. The vassals died of cold and hunger. In winter it rained and snowed into the houses. There were holes in the walls, in the roofs, everywhere. But a hundred and fifty years ago all that was changed. Now everyone cats his fill, we are housed like gentlemen and live well.”

A question escaped me:

“But who brought about these changes?”

The old peasant looked around him. (Margaret, who didn’t know a word of Gaelic, had gone on ahead.) I slipped a two-shilling piece into his hand. He bent his long thin head, jammed with Celtic wisdom and superstition, toward me:

“The man who comes back at night,” he said.

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Chapter Nine

A Walk in the Castle Grounds

The visit was drawing to a close. The guests were starting to pack. As we were the last to arrive, Harry and I were invited to stay two or three days longer than the others.

One fine autumn afternoon Gerald asked the guests to a hunt. "It will probably be the last of the season," he added. "The first cold spell always drives the game away."

I was the only one to refuse. I said I was tired, which was true. But I was more nervous than tired. An afternoon spent loafing by myself would put me in shape again. I had seen the northern section of the grounds, in front of the castle. The driveway, gardens, tennis courts, and golf course were all in that section. I decided to investigate the southern section, behind the castle. It was considered rather uninteresting and was usually deserted. Just what I needed.

I noticed that when I said I wasn't coming a look of

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worry or annoyance passed across Gerald's face. He suggested that I come along in the carriage, but I refused. Harry offered to stay with me at the castle, but I wouldn't allow it. Both Gerald and Harry were too polite to insist, but I could see that they were reluctant to leave me alone at the castle. When I came out of my room, dressed for walking, I found Harry on the landing. The other guests called from the hall that they were waiting for him.

"Edith," he said, lowering his voice, "don't do anything foolish."

"Foolish? What do you mean?"

"This," he said, even more softly. "Don't explore the park too much and don't explore the castle at all."

Harry was a soldier and he had been decorated. He had fought in India and Africa. And now, after eight or ten days at Craven, he was nervous as a woman. He should have known that Gerald would never leave the spot if one of the guests, especially a woman, was in the least danger.

As for exploring the attics and secret passageways, I wasn't a bit tempted. No doubt something, or somebody, was hidden in the castle. On the other hand, Kitty was right when she said everyone had always lived in peace at Craven—except for a single incident far in the past. Poor little Kitty! It seemed to me now that the breach of her engagement was a great mercy. The whole thing was extremely confusing!

After the hunters had left, I walked around to the back

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of the castle. I stopped there out of curiosity. At the corner a tower with blocked-out windows jutted from the wall. It was invisible from the part of the castle occupied by the guests. The kitchen and its dependencies, the dining room, servants' quarters, and Gerald's apartment were all on the ground floor. There were two doors on a level with the ground, giving direct access to the outside; one of these was in Gerald's apartment, the other in the servants' quarters. Gerald's windows were so close to the ground that you could step through them onto the sandy alley leading to the tower.

I couldn't understand this odd arrangement; it seemed neither useful nor pleasant. Gerald had the choice of a hundred rooms, yet he lived next to the kitchen and servants' quarters, in the gloomiest part of the castle. The view from his windows consisted of a tower, some sand, and a thicket. A line of old trees a few steps away cast heavy shadows over the windows. The underbrush growing between the tree trunks was like a high, thick wall along the back of the castle.

The place exuded an atmosphere of abandon and neglect. So much the better. No one would disturb my walk.

I was about to try the path through the thicket when the door to the servants' quarters opened behind me. I turned around and saw one of the four old menservants. He was dressed in the Craven livery and carried a tray. When he saw me he turned on his heel and rushed back into the kitchen, slamming the door behind him. But I

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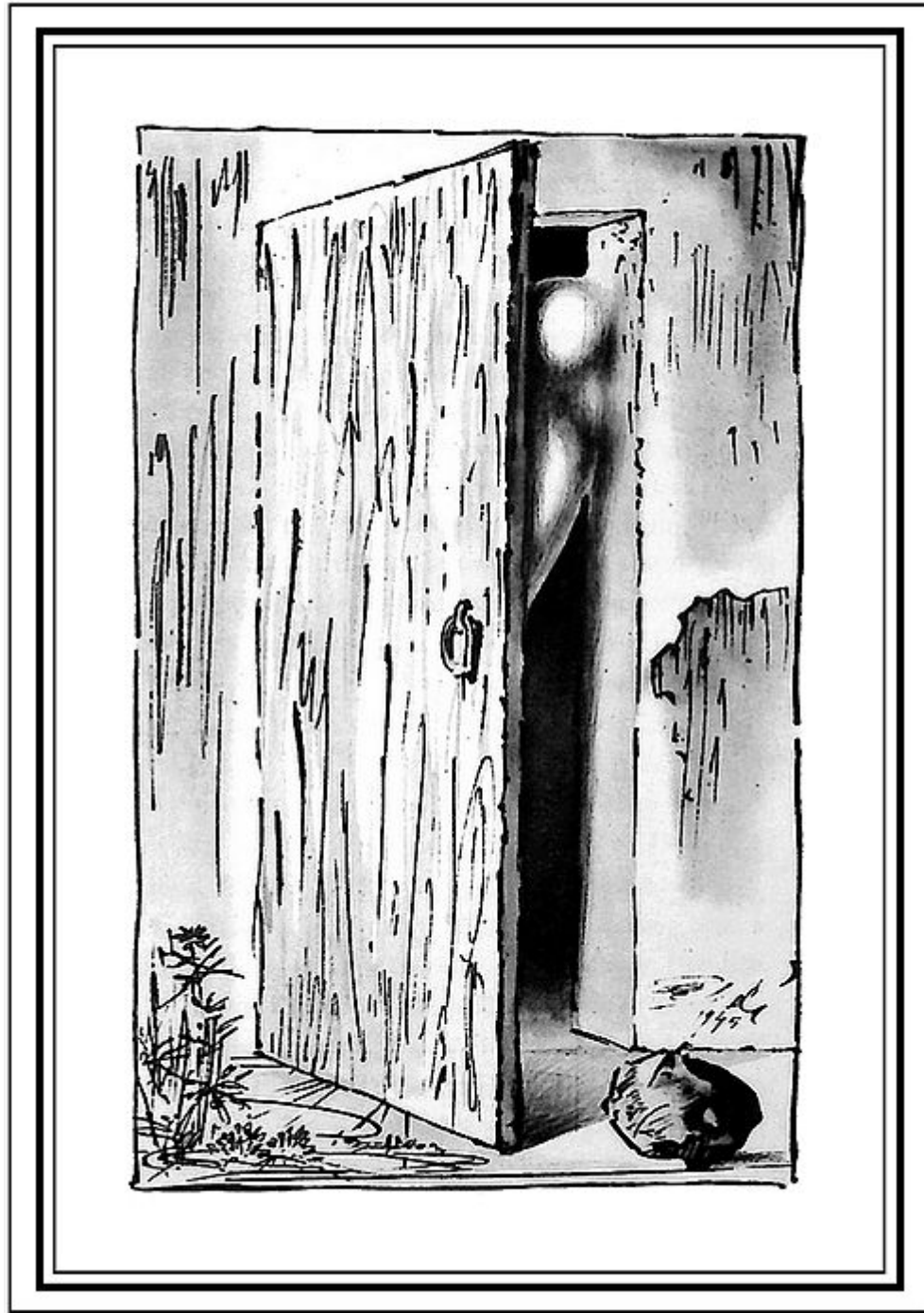
had time to see what was on the tray: a large bowl of cream and a plate of tomatoes. The bowl was about the size of a salad bowl; the tomatoes would have been enough for two or three gluttons. I couldn't keep from laughing. Whoever had ordered such a meal must have a cast-iron stomach! But then,

perhaps the food would not be eaten all at once. Maybe it was a gift of charity for some good woman in the village; or even ... for the toads who protected the vegetable garden by eating the slugs. Our old gardener used to say that toads consider cream and tomatoes a great delicacy, and he gave them some occasionally to make them stay in our vegetable garden.

Then I remembered certain details which destroyed these hypotheses. The tray was of solid engraved silver, the plate and bowl were of old Wedgwood, the doily was of precious lace. In short, the tray and its contents were part of the service reserved for the baronet and his guests. A servant of the castle would never use it for any other purpose.

A ridiculous idea occurred to me. But nothing seemed impossible any more at Craven. Had Gerald inherited Uncle Samuel's companion? If so, the lady in question must have an extraordinary appetite. But why so much secrecy? Why had the old servant looked frightened and rushed back into the kitchen? Was everyone afraid in this place?

A nose appeared behind a curtain of the kitchen window and vanished almost instantly. There was nothing I



could do but go away. As long as I stayed, the owner of the nose would remain in the kitchen with his cream and tomatoes. I took the path through the thicket without looking behind me.

(Mrs. Murray rested her knitting on her knees.

“No, my child, don’t expect anything unusual. The walk merely gave me one more occasion for amazement. I was to be frightened soon enough, but later.”)

For about an hour I wandered like a schoolgirl through the thick woods. From time to time I stopped to listen to the resigned whisper of falling leaves, the last murmur of summer, like the farewell of a dying man. There was a cold breath in the air. It carried, with the smell of the sea, the scent of damp hay that fills the Scotch countryside when the heather has blossomed and dried.

In two or three days I would have to leave Craven. It was high time I spoke to Gerald about Kitty. Each time I had tried to arrange an interview with him, Gerald had slipped out of it. In the two rather long letters she had written me, Kitty had never even alluded to Gerald. I concluded that they were still in love with each other.

I remembered the words: “I thought at first that I would be able to arrange things.... But now I realize I can’t. It’s impossible.” Impossible? With a little ingenuity, a great many women have succeeded where sheer masculine energy has failed. A solution occurred to me, so simple that I wondered why none of us had thought of it before. Since only the nights were dangerous

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at the castle, I saw no reason why Gerald and Kitty couldn’t sleep in a comfortable house near by and spend the days at Craven.

I was impatient to tell Gerald. After the hunt I knew I would find him in his study where he spent most of his time. He wouldn’t get away from me today.

The woods ended at the edge of a cliff. I looked out over a vast plain of cultivated land, the third of an immense, ably administered domain. It was bathed in the sad light of a wintry sky. I shivered at the thought of six months of snow and ice, of the long winter evenings alone in the deserted castle. Yes, I must speak to Gerald. I knew in advance what Kitty would say.

There was another path leading back into the woods. I decided to explore it. It was somewhat overgrown at the start, but it gradually improved. According to my calculations, it should lead to the alley at the back of the castle. I walked along, turning over my plans for the marriage. Suddenly a muffled sound of beating came to me on the wind. A little

farther along I saw that the trees bordering the path on the left looked black. I walked faster.

After a few minutes I came to a hedge of yew trees. And what a hedge! It was more like a rampart. When had it last been sheared? It was twelve to fifteen feet high, and anyone trying to force his way through it would be caught like a rat in a trap. The branches, left free to grow as they pleased, were tangled into a thick, almost solid mass.

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A wall so forbidding must hide something precious. What?

The muffled beating had grown louder. It sounded like flails beating ripe wheat.

I soon came to an open gate between two pillars in the wall of yews. It was about the same age as the platformed staircase. Its huge padlock might have been made for a prison door. Across the top of the gate there was a plaque bearing an inscription worn down by frequent polishing, but legible: "No Entrance." This was the gate to the Craven maze.

All the mazes I had seen before this were open to guests and visitors.

Beyond the gate the path became a flat dirt road, leading to the castle between two straight rows of yews about six feet high. Each tree bore on its top the grimacing head of a real or fabulous animal. The rows of monsters seemed to guard some secret.

Now I understood the beating noise. No doubt gardeners were flattening the dirt road within the forbidden gate.

The road was meticulously kept. The yew trees on either side were the same height, about six feet high, and sheared as smooth as velvet. The earth had been scrupulously raked and flattened, as though for an elf to dance on. Did a barefoot child come here to play?

I hesitated to enter the gate. But the "No Entrance" sign did not seem to refer to Uncle Samuel's house rules. No doubt it was addressed only to strangers, I thought.

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I went through the gate, then stopped. At my feet, in the soft earth, footprints described a circle. In the center of the circle, more deeply imprinted, was the impression of a plane-tree leaf. I looked up. There was no plane tree above me. I looked at the alleys, groves, and thickets. There

was no plane tree in sight. I had seen no plane trees in the forest. This was getting interesting. I recalled the leaf-shaped spot I had seen in the corridor.

I was about to go farther into the maze, when the noise stopped suddenly. The silence under the rigid yew sprays was oppressive. Then I heard a sound coming from the distance, a familiar and continuous sound, the gurgling of a brook. Where was it? It should have run downhill across the woods, yet during my walk I had seen nothing. Perhaps it filled a basin, hidden somewhere in the maze. Maybe there was some danger there which explained the “No Entrance” sign at the gate.

It was growing late. Before I went back to the castle I wanted to have another look at the strange impression of the leaf. But I heard voices and retired discreetly to the gate. As I didn’t want to be caught running away like a schoolgirl, I sat down on the grass, a few feet outside the maze. I listened to the scattered remarks that emerged from the thickets and hedges.

An authoritative voice, probably that of the head gardener, was giving orders to an invisible subordinate.

“Cut that root; it might trip someone up.”

Trip someone up? People come here, then?

The voice continued, in a surprised and irritated tone:

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“Look at those fresh footprints over there! They aren’t ours. Someone has been here!”

A rather heavy young man, carrying a wooden blade probably used for flattening the ground, appeared at the gate and looked up and down the road. When he saw me he fled as though he had seen a ghost. An elderly man took his place almost immediately. He gave me an angry look. I drew figures on the ground with a stick as nonchalantly as I could. My innocent manner reassured him. But it didn’t prevent him from calling his aid and, with an enormous key, locking the gate right under my nose. He threw me a triumphant glance, as if to say: “This will keep you from trespassing again!” and wished me good night. I think I blushed.

When the two men had gone, I returned to the gate. There was just room enough between two bars to squeeze my head through. I saw the gardener’s footprints and my own. But the intriguing impression of the leaf had been carefully smoothed over.

I turned and hurried up the road to the castle. And here I must make another shameful confession. Once before, the first time I had crossed the

corridor alone, I had turned around. During that walk in the castle grounds I turned around ... several times.

Chapter Ten

After the Walk

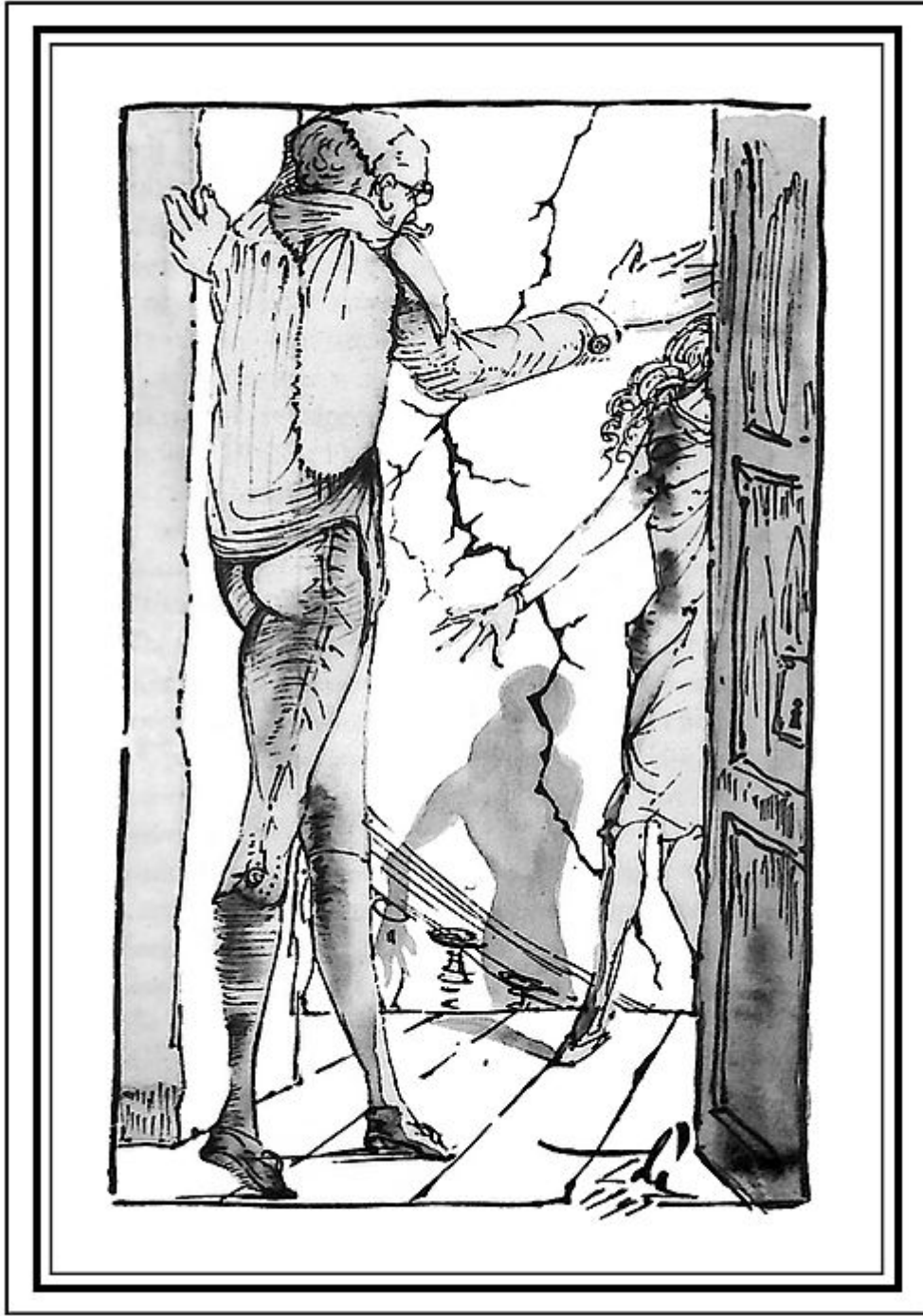
When I reached the stoop, the sound of footsteps and voices informed me that the hunters had just returned. There were two hours until dinner, ample time for a confidential talk with Gerald in his study before dressing.

The study was around the corner of a narrow corridor at the back of the main hall. I turned this corner and found myself face to face with Harry. He had just closed the study door behind him. He looked pale and angry. To my great surprise, he barred the way.

“Where is Gerald?” I cried out in alarm.

“Gerald isn’t here!” Harry answered with surprising rudeness. Then he added in a more moderate tone: “I mean he isn’t in his study. I think he’s speaking to the butler.”

Thank God! Nothing had happened to Gerald. But why was Harry blocking the door?



I knew Harry would never tell a lie, and I didn't attempt to enter the study. There was no use interrupting Gerald while he was talking to the butler. What I had to tell him could wait an hour or two. Besides, Harry's behavior had driven all my projects for Gerald and Kitty out of my mind. I went to my room, my heart beating more rapidly than usual.

Harry Seymour was not easily upset. Something unusual must have happened. Had he had a serious quarrel with Gerald? Not likely. Besides, a quarrel would never have made him lose his self-possession to such an extent. If I had tried to enter the study, Harry would have prevented me by force. Evidently there was something in the room that he didn't want me to see.

Then I realized for the first time that during my stay at Craven Harry had worried and interested me as much as Gerald. Had Harry some part in the drama? Did he know the answer to the mystery? Perhaps he had discovered the secret of Craven in the study. I sensed that he was annoyed with Gerald.

Suddenly I felt that all I had learned about Craven, all my observations and suppositions were becoming coherent and taking form like a jigsaw puzzle. For a moment I sensed the presence of a stranger somewhere in the castle.

As you probably know, I am an active person. I could never submit passively to an unpleasant situation. I decided not to leave the castle, but to question Harry. I couldn't bear the increasing strain any longer. I would

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solve the mystery this very night, once and for all.

I heard Harry go to his room, after assuring himself that I was in my room. When I started downstairs for dinner, I found him waiting for me on the landing.

No doubt about it: he was watching me.

He escorted me to the dining room. We exchanged polite questions about the afternoon, as if we had not seen each other since lunch. Harry's face was an impenetrable mask.

As we sat down to table I saw Gerald glance at the clock on the wall opposite him, start to make a sign to the butler, and check himself. All this was very rapid, but I was alert and nothing escaped me.

This and my first dinner at Craven are the only ones that stand out in my memory. The women wore their jewels in honor of our next-to-last dinner together. There were more glasses than usual beside each plate. As we would not see one another again for a long time, Gerald wanted to offer us the best wines in his cellar. The three young men, Margaret, and even Ellie, heard this announcement with frank satisfaction. I was more reserved.

Harry said nothing. He looked at the numerous glasses and bottles with suppressed anger.

To me, Gerald's voice had not rung true. The master of Craven was not yet accustomed to hiding the truth.

Chapter Eleven

The Dinner

Not only were the wines of the best, but there was an astonishing variety of them. The rich wines of France and Italy, the sweet, heavy wines of Spain and Portugal flowed into the glasses, which were rapidly emptied and promptly refilled by the four footmen. When the port, a royal gift to Sir Samuel, was served at dessert, all but three of the diners were heavy-headed. Gerald, Harry, and myself had hardly touched our glasses.

I noticed that Harry and Gerald were not on speaking terms. Gerald avoided looking at Harry, and Harry merely shot one or two enigmatic glances at Gerald. What had Harry discovered in the study?

Gerald was nervous and seemed to play his role of host with difficulty. I felt that he was looking forward to being alone again.

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Harry was obviously under a strain. Seated between Margaret and myself, he talked with his usual poise and charm. Then, in the middle of a sentence, he stopped short. His face was suddenly tense. It's my window banging," he said, trying to look calm. "They must have forgotten to close it." He took up the conversation again almost immediately. He was reacting exactly as Gerald had reacted to slight noises on the floor above.

Yes, I remember that dinner well. I can still feel the secret understanding between master and servants, the tension between Gerald and Harry. By contrast, the guests were more lighthearted than ever under the influence of the wine. Soon they would all sleep soundly.

I kept wondering what Harry had learned an hour before in the study. I was as puzzled as ever. Not one of my suppositions would withstand the light of reason.

People do not usually retire early on their next-to-last night together. This night was an exception. The guests almost fell asleep in their chairs. Toward ten o'clock Gerald wished us good night. As soon as we had all left the room ... he disappeared.

As usual, we climbed the stairs by candlelight. I mounted slowly, and Harry adjusted his step to mine. When we reached the landing we were

alone. This was my chance to question him.

“Harry, what did you see in the study?”

He didn’t answer at once. The suddenness of my question caught him off guard.

“What did you see?” I repeated.

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“I saw a book, open on the table.”

He added in a more assured tone: “Lock both your doors, Edith, but don’t bolt the communicating door.”

He went into his room before I could say another word.

I stood there two or three minutes, wondering whether to demand an explanation. Then I went into my room. Incredible as it sounded, I felt that Harry’s answer was true. But what did it mean?

The other day Gerald had furtively locked himself in his room with a book. But what could a French book have to do with a remote old castle in Scotland?

One can judge a man’s interests by the books he reads. Harry had glanced at an open book and discovered the secret of the baronets of Craven.

My temples throbbed and there was a ringing in my ears. I was feverish with excitement. Otherwise I would never have done what I did that night.

There was no use going to bed, I wouldn’t have been able to close my eyes. The idea of lying quietly under the blankets in that alcove repelled me. There was no use trying to read, I wouldn’t have seen the words on the page before me.

I sat thinking. Maybe I would accept the invitation to stay at the castle two or three days longer. Then I would be alone with Gerald and Harry. If Harry had really discovered the secret, Gerald would be free to break the oath of silence. Or maybe I would leave tomorrow with the others and tell Kitty what a narrow escape she had

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had. The atmosphere in the castle was growing unbearable.

My thoughts were interrupted by the realization that the next room was unaccountably quiet. Harry had neither taken off his shoes nor locked his doors.

I heard the click of a trigger. Harry was loading a revolver.

Chapter Twelve

An Honest Account

This is an honest account. It won't give you a very high opinion of me. No, don't protest! I didn't know I was capable of such deceit. In moments of crisis the most honorable woman in the world will resort to cunning. With shame, yes! But without remorse. At least I wasn't a coward. There was some danger involved in the secret of Craven. Harry's loaded revolver was sufficient proof of that.

But what was this danger? I knew Harry would refuse to tell me. He would never betray a friend and host. Besides, he wouldn't want to frighten me.

Whatever it was, Harry was preparing to meet it and preserve three women from it. I was equally determined to face it. I wanted to find out exactly what peril Kitty had escaped. But above all, I must confess, I was dying of curiosity!

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The hands on my watch pointed to midnight. In the corridor all was silent. The guests were asleep, tired out by the hunt and stupefied by the quantities of wine they had consumed. It was not mere sociability that made Gerald invite them to the hunt and offer them the best wines in his cellar.

I listened intently. As you probably know, when one has reached a certain degree of nervous tension one's hearing becomes abnormally acute. Behind the massive door at the end of the corridor something was happening.

The light went out next door. My little deceptions began. I blew out my candle. A few minutes went by. In the next room a hand leaned against the communicating door and a restrained voice pronounced clearly:

"Edith!"

I didn't answer.

"Edith!" repeated the voice, a little louder.

Silence. I heard Harry open his door.

I was about to do likewise. I gave up almost immediately. Whoever has tried to open a door without making any noise knows that it's almost impossible. I knew Harry had the keen hearing and trained eye of an officer. He would discover me right away, and I knew he was perfectly capable of locking me up without ceremony. I had one alternative: to listen at the keyhole.

At the end of the corridor a key turned in three locks and the massive door opened and closed again slowly. The sound of padded shoes passed down the hallway.

I started. Something enormous and damp had fallen

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on the floor. Then I heard the footsteps again. I remembered what Fred Burnett had heard. "When the sound occurred, the steps continued, but when the sound was heard again, the steps stopped." The description was accurate. But one detail had been omitted: The steps zig-zagged across the hall. The alternating sounds passed along the outer wall as far as possible from the guest rooms.

I couldn't make myself stay in my room any longer. I was dressed in black, the corridor was dark, I wouldn't be seen. I pushed my door open cautiously and ...

I still wonder what kept me from crying out.

On the landing, at the head of the platformed staircase, I could just make out a group of men, standing motionless and silent. For a moment the light of a lantern revealed Gerald's face. Strange detail: he wore a hat; all the others were bareheaded.

Then something inexplicable happened.

Gerald started downstairs. Halfway down, he stopped. Two footmen followed and stopped behind him. The fall of a heavy, wet mass was heard on the stone step. A piece of linen flashed above the heads of the men on the stairs and disappeared.

The strange ceremony continued. The three men descended at the same time and stopped. At each stop there was a thud. Growing fainter and fainter, the noise crossed the deserted hall and was lost in the distance.

Three minutes passed. Harry's door opened and closed quietly. I closed my door and waited in my room. A discreet

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touch informed me that my guardian angel was inspecting my door. He wanted to make sure that I was safely asleep. Reassured on this point, he departed toward the landing. For a moment I stood listening. Harry was crossing the hall.

I looked out the window. The garden and surroundings were deserted. The strange procession had taken the alley that runs along the woods at the back of the castle. Harry was following it.

I put on a long cape with a hood which made me unrecognizable. I listened. There was not a sound in the corridor. One of the next rooms was empty; in the other Margaret was snoring like a man.

(Mrs. Murray broke off:

“Believe it or not, as I was about to go downstairs I stopped.”

“Were you afraid?”

“Yes,” she said, “I was. I was afraid of the unknown. I didn’t know what to believe any more. I recalled things I had read. Old memories came back. It is said that in certain parts of Scotland there is still a vestige of paganism, a survival of Celtic cults.”)

Was the strange procession a rite?

What was the invisible thing that the bareheaded men were following? Was that the danger? What danger?

I called myself a coward. I wanted to find out, and I would.

The alley was darkened by the shadow of the woods on one side and of the castle wall on the other. (It was

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a rule at Craven that all lights in outside windows be extinguished before midnight.) Despite the darkness, I could make out Harry, a hundred steps away, following the edge of the woods. Farther along I could see a black patch, dotted with light. I recognized the torches and lanterns of the procession. The procession continued to stop every few minutes and start again. Harry did likewise. He was keeping a certain distance away from the group ahead. The lights gradually faded away into the woods. Soon Harry, too, disappeared.

For a long time I walked through the blackness of the woods. The lights of the procession seemed to have been spirited away by some evil genius of the forest. Finally a clearing revealed the entrance to the maze. For a few minutes I stood at the gate, listening, my heart pounding.

The sound of running water increased, decreased, and stopped. Then all was silent again under the motionless yew trees. Where was the procession? Where was Harry?

I took five or six steps and stopped short.

(Mrs. Murray paused.

“Do you know anything about mazes?”

“No, I’ve never seen one.”

“Not even a drawing or a photograph? No? Well, then I’ll tell you what a Scotch maze is like. The hedged-in alleys describe a series of rectangles, one inside the other. The number of rectangles depends on the whim of the owner. Most of the alleys are dead ends, fool’s traps. There is only one route leading from the

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gate to the center, which is marked by a bench or a sundial.

“Most mazes are small and the alleys are just wide enough for two people walking abreast. The maze at Craven was an exception in both respects. Moreover, the hedges were exceptionally thick and high. It was impossible to see through or over them. No one had ever been told why.”

Mrs. Murray seemed to repress an unpleasant memory. She continued):

My eyes were growing accustomed to the darkness. I found myself between two long, dark, even walls. I recognized the hedges of an alley. The procession must have been hidden somewhere within the maze. I felt my way along the hedges. In the distance a confused murmur arose, and as I advanced it grew louder, more distinct. What was it?

I turned a corner and stopped, dumfounded. A wall of yews blocked the view, but between the branches wild sparks came and went like fireflies. In a burst of light I saw a silver streak between the tree trunks. There was a fresh-water pond hidden in the maze. The confused murmur was now the sound of frightened, agitated voices. What was going on behind the wall of trees?

Suddenly I covered my ears. I heard an indescribable cry. I can only repeat Ellie King’s words: “It was a voice, and yet it wasn’t a voice.”

In the midst of these strident, confused sounds I recognized Gerald’s familiar voice. Where was he? I had just

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asked myself this question, when he answered in such a respectful, deferential tone that I thought I was dreaming.

“Please don’t worry. It’s nothing, nothing, I assure you. Tomorrow all this will be over. Yes, they will bring it to you immediately. Run, James, run!”

The weird voice began to emit raucous, groaning sounds.

Whom was Gerald talking to? Where was Harry? I heard hurried steps approaching. I had barely time to flatten myself against the hedge. A servant passed, running like mad, and grazed me without seeing me. I recognized Gerald's valet.

The darkness, the horrible voice, Gerald's incomprehensible remarks, the man fleeing as though he were being chased by a werewolf, the fear of being discovered—all this nightmare made me want to run away as fast as I could. But where was the exit? I could still hear the running footsteps of the valet. I would follow them. The castle staff knew all the detours of the maze.

I don't know how far I had gone when I crashed into an impenetrable wall of greenery.

(Mrs. Murray paused to put some order in her recollections.)

The weather is very changeable at home. The sky clears or clouds over in a few seconds. I could no longer see anything at all. The sound of running footsteps had ceased. The boxwood and yew hedges, my only landmarks, had melted into the night. Where was I? Then I

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remembered that most of the alleys in a maze are dead ends.

Would I have to stay here until morning, wandering among these fool's traps, not even daring to call for help? For the first time I realized the folly of my escapade. I had ventured into a maze, alone and at night, where the cleverest got lost in the daytime.

But ... was I alone?

My heart pounded violently in answer. I would rather go back, rather run into Gerald and the servants and ... God knows what else! Anything would be better than this impasse, this fear of the unknown. I turned and started to grope my way back.

Suddenly I almost screamed. A hand was placed on my shoulder.

"Edith, you're out of your mind! Don't go any farther. I won't allow you to see it. It's horrible. I'll take you back to London as soon as possible."

Harry had only one idea: to get back to our respective rooms without further delay. Luckily he was a strong man. He supported me, pulled me along, almost carried me. I felt faint. But, as fate willed it, there was more in store for me that night.

We had gone halfway back to the castle in silence, when Harry pulled me to the side of the road.

A light appeared at the edge of the woods and approached so rapidly that I wondered if some bicyclist had gotten lost in the grounds. James ran past us breathlessly. In the light of his lantern I saw he was carrying a

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bottle of gin and a bottle of Black and White whisky.

What was going on in the maze? Had Gerald descended to drinking with the servants?

The outside door in the corridor leading to Gerald's apartment was open. A little oil lamp suspended from the ceiling gave off a sparse, gloomy light. I glanced at Harry. He was frowning and looked more than ever like an imperator about to pronounce a severe sentence. As we entered the main hall I stopped him.

"Harry, what are those people doing? Is Gerald going to get drunk with the servants?"

The change on Harry's face was abrupt. He looked positively relieved. He even started to smile. He didn't answer immediately but hesitated, searching for the right words. Then he said:

"Gerald is merely doing his duty, as all the lords of Craven have done before him. And now, Edith, you are going to bed."

As I entered my room I heard Harry murmur to himself:

"Just the same, it would be better not to invite women here."

Two days later I understood why he looked so relieved at my question. He was saying to himself: "Thank God! She hasn't found out."

Before I finally went to bed I heard footsteps recross the corridor. But this time they were the steps of men carrying a heavy load.

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Chapter Thirteen

A Sleepless Night

For some reason I didn't want to lock my doors that night. I did lock the outer door, but I left my bedroom door wide open.

Try as I would, I couldn't go to sleep. Images of what I had seen in the maze and confused, unanswered questions whirled through my mind. People were coming and going in the corridor leading to the tower. There was a continuous shuffling of padded feet and a murmur of muffled voices. The telephone rang repeatedly. I recognized the voices of the servants, of James and the butler. I didn't hear Gerald's voice once. Where was he?

Toward four o'clock in the morning the massive door at the end of the corridor was closed again and locked. The sound of agitated voices and footsteps, the ringing of the telephone ceased. I listened for a moment. A great silence had descended over the castle.

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At five o'clock I was awakened by the sound of a car coming up the driveway. I arose and looked out of my window. Gerald was waiting on the steps in evening clothes. He evidently had not gone to bed.

The car stopped at the door and a man got out slowly. He was dressed in black, corpulent, his face framed in iron-gray side whiskers. I recognized the court physician from photographs I had seen. As the chauffeur started to climb the steps with the doctor's bag, Gerald stopped him and took the bag up himself. The baronet and Sir Francis entered the castle, talking in low voices. I caught one word: "Congestion."

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Chapter Fourteen

A Change Occurs at the Castle

Twenty minutes later I saw Gerald accompany Sir Francis back to the waiting car. Sir Francis gave my cousin a document, and the two men shook hands solemnly.

For a moment Gerald seemed lost in thought. Then he ran up the stoop, two steps at a time, like a schoolboy the day before vacation. It was the first time since my arrival that I had seen him act in such a lighthearted, youthful fashion.

The car started. I watched it leave, wondering what secret it was taking with it. Then I heard the window in the next room close. Harry had been watching too.

Before I could attempt to solve this new puzzle, I fell asleep, exhausted by my long vigil.

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Next morning, on my way to breakfast, I met Gerald in the main hall. "Who was ill last night?" I asked bluntly.

"None of the guests and none of the servants," he replied, and left the room. But I had time to notice that a great change had come over him. He was himself again.

At breakfast a servant handed me a note from Gerald. He wrote that he would be busy with important business all day but that he would join us for dinner. The note ended with the request that I agree to prolong my stay for another day.

At table that morning most of the guests said they had been awakened in the night by footsteps and voices in the corridor. But they had all promptly fallen asleep again. The Craven wines had served their purpose.

"Do you think someone was taken seriously ill?" one of them asked.

"No, Gerald just told me that none of the guests or servants were sick," I answered.

Margaret looked at me maliciously. "I told you there was someone in the castle who goes dashing about the woods at night!" she said.

A few incoherent but vivid impressions are all I remember about that last day at Craven. A castle silent as the grave. Many open doors. The massive door in the corridor as tightly closed as ever. The four old men-servants, their eyes reddened by the slow, painful tears of old age. "Such a good master!" I heard one of them murmur. Once I passed the study, and there was Gerald

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writing at his desk with his back to the open door!

I made some notes in my diary during my stay at Craven. Let me read you what I wrote those last two days.

Later:

1. *He sat down three times with his back to the doors.*
2. *During dinner two shutters banged violently on the first floor. Gerald didn't budge.*
3. *The butler and footmen no longer watch the doors leading to the platformed staircase.*
4. *Gerald is serious and preoccupied. But he doesn't look unhappy.*

(Mrs. Murray stopped reading and continued her story.)

After dinner, when the ladies retired to the drawing room, leaving the men to their brandy and cigars, Ellie King whispered in my ear:

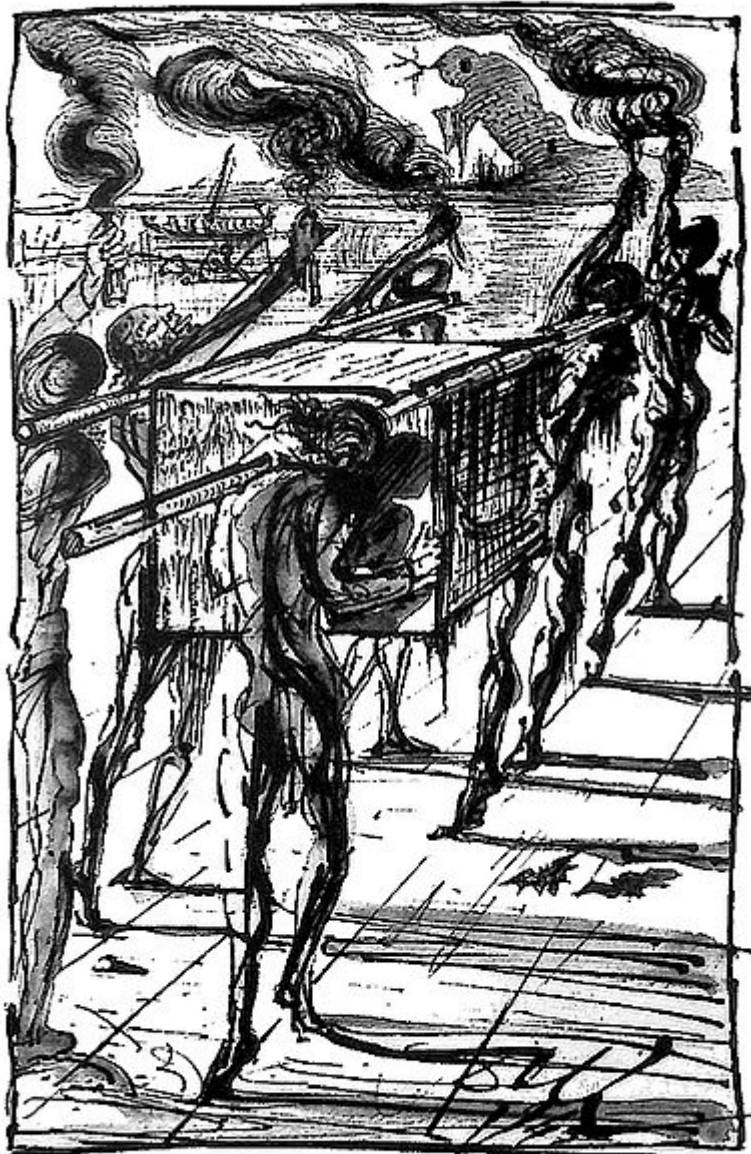
"Gerald looks like a prisoner who has just been paroled and doesn't know how to act."

Harry, too, had changed. Here is what I wrote about him that day:

Although Ellie, Margaret, and myself are in the castle, Harry has gone to play golf with the men. This is the first time he has left the women alone in the castle.

Since my arrival Harry had watched the women guests unceasingly. He had been with me a great deal. Now he seemed to avoid me. That evening, after a brief

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good night in the corridor, he said: “Edith, you don’t have to lock your doors any more.”

He went into his room before I could say anything. He evidently didn’t want to be questioned.

In my room I wrote the following note:

Everyone is leaving early tomorrow morning, except Harry and myself. Gerald is keeping us a day longer. The same enormous quantity of wine was served tonight as last night. I wonder why. Harry drank as much as the others, but Gerald hardly touched his glass.

An hour later:

Harry has put out his light. He said he saw something horrible in the maze last night, and he goes to sleep as though nothing bad happened. It's beyond reason.

A half hour later I scribbled these last words:

I can't stand it any longer. I want to leave.

(Mrs. Murray paused. Then she said:

“Have you ever been awakened from a sound sleep by the light of a passing candle or the flare in the fireplace. Yes? Well, that's what happened to me that night.”)

Toward four in the morning bright lights danced against my windowpane. There was no fire in the fireplace, my candle was out. The lights were reflected from the outside. I looked out of my window. It was just light enough to see dimly.

Gerald was walking slowly across the garden. He was

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followed by a procession of ten men, walking two by two. Two valets, carrying burning torches, headed the procession. Behind them eight men, four on each side, were carrying something between them that I couldn't make out. When my eyes became accustomed to the half-darkness, I distinguished two long poles placed over their shoulders. The poles were bent under the weight of a dark, indistinct mass.

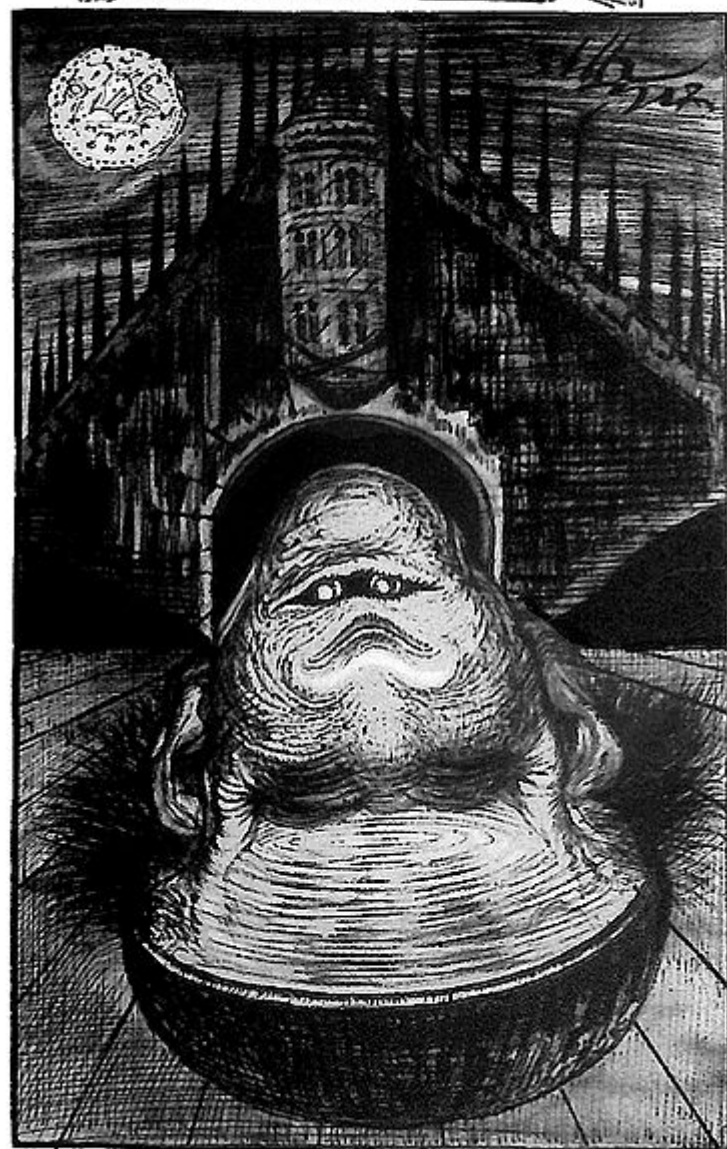
The eight porters advanced slowly under the heavy load. In a gust of wind the torchlight played on the white hair, bent backs, and wrinkled faces of old men. I recognized the old menservants of the castle.

One of the valets at the head of the procession lifted his torch to light up the road. For a moment the light fell on a huge, black, square chest

supported by the poles. Gerald gave an order that I didn't catch. The procession turned the corner around the castle and disappeared. It had taken the road through the woods.

Why had Gerald chosen old men for this heavy work? Such lack of consideration was not like him. But by this time nothing could greatly surprise me at Craven. I went back to bed and slept soundly. When I awoke next morning the dilapidated old coach had already taken the guests to the station.

SIR. BEGER PHILIPS MC TWM
1730-1905



Chapter Fifteen

The Explanation

I sat down to breakfast alone that morning. Harry had already eaten. So far he had always breakfasted with me. I wondered why he hadn't waited for me. The evening before, as the guests were saying good night, I saw Gerald beckon Harry to come back. Sure enough, after Harry had seen me to my door, he returned downstairs and stayed there an hour. And now he was avoiding me more than ever. Why?

There was a note from Gerald beside my plate:

I owe you an explanation and I have an important favor to ask you. Come to my study after breakfast; no one will disturb us there.

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I thought of Kitty waiting for me at home. Was he going to speak of her at last?

I breakfasted on a cup of tea, consumed in two minutes. A moment later I stood at the study door, where Harry, pale and stiff, had barred the way.

Before I could knock, I heard Gerald call: "Come in, Edith!"

No! Really! It was impossible to associate the idea of terror with this peaceful scholar's retreat. It was an austere room with its rows of dignified volumes, its heavy desk and imposing fireplace. Not a single painting or print relieved the monotony of the dark oak paneling. The vases were empty of flowers. How sad it all looked in the faded October light. The withering leaves of half-bare trees were like a threadbare curtain over the windows. The shadow of the forest fell over the room, the ever-present forest leading to the maze.

I sat down. In the gray light that filtered into the room I saw for the first time how greatly Gerald had changed. He guessed my thoughts.

"You find me aged, don't, you?" he said. "Yes, I've grown twenty years older in the last two years. Edith..

He suddenly bent toward me and took my hands impulsively, as he used to.

“Edith,” he said, “my happiness depends on you. Tell Kitty I want to marry her, if she’ll accept me again. Tell her I am free now, free to do as I please.”

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I wasn’t surprised at this request. I had more or less expected it for the last two days, and I was ready to grant it.

“Gerald,” I said, “I have taken the place of the parents Kitty lost. I am responsible for her happiness. I believe you will make her a good husband. I consent to do what you ask, but on one condition: that you tell me the truth and the whole truth.

“What made you break your engagement, and without giving any explanation? Why are there rules and restrictions here, bolted doors, two-hundred-year-old coaches that go about at night? (Gerald started at this. He was evidently surprised that I knew so much.) Why were young women never invited to the castle? Why did women servants have to go home before nightfall? Why was the maze closed to the guests? Gerald, what frightened you when the ceiling creaked?”

At this last question Gerald looked up.

“I was afraid to see the master of Craven enter the room,” he said.

I was too astonished to say anything.

“Did you believe, like everyone else except the staff, that I and my predecessors at the castle for the past two centuries were the real lords of Craven. If you did, that is to the credit of the servants and their so-called masters. The last baronet of Craven Castle, Sir Roger Philip McTeam, was born on the fifth of April, 1730. He died here in his castle, yesterday, the twentieth of October, 1905:

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and we buried him last night in a corner of the grounds, in accordance with his last wishes.”

Despite my surprise, I had made a mental calculation.

“You must be mistaken as to the dates. A man doesn’t live one hundred and seventy-five years.”

“A man doesn’t, no. But a toad does!”

“What are you talking about?”

“The truth! This particular toad had human intelligence and the heart of a man.”

I could hardly believe my ears.

Gerald continued:

“As you probably know, the human embryo passes through all the stages of evolution, from the invertebrate to the mammal. At one point the embryo is an amphibian. The unfortunate offspring of Lady Caroline and Sir Charles never developed beyond that point. But he grew and developed mentally. For nearly two centuries he endured the torment of knowing he was a monster and feeling he was a man. His parents died young, after giving him the rudiments of an education which he continued by himself. For a century and a half—that is, since he was eighteen years old—he has administered the estate.

“For a century and a half his nephews, grandnephews, and great-grandnephews succeeded one another at the castle. They bore the title of baronet and played the role of squire. Actually they were merely at Craven to follow orders and even more to ...”

“To do what?”

“To hide the family disgrace.

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“The task was made easier by the fact that Sir Roger couldn’t bear to be seen by anyone but his nephews and the servants. That may sound strange, but how can one rely on the moods of an abnormal creature? He waited until night to leave the tower where he lived. Then he had himself driven from one end of the estate to the other. He always used the old coach that had belonged to his parents. He couldn’t stand anything modern. He never allowed any changes to be made in the castle or grounds.

“He took an interest in the welfare of his tenants and relieved the misery of the poor. With the aid of his nephews and his oldest servants, whom he preferred, he planted forests, drained marshes, and cultivated crops. Not a tree was cut down, not a load of apples sold without the permission of ‘the Old Gentleman,’ as the servants called him. If necessary, and when his webbed fingers allowed, he appended his signature. Yes, he could talk, but with difficulty, and the so-called baronets had to learn to understand him. (I remembered the inhuman voice I had heard in the maze.)

“Despite his handicaps, the poor soul had a few pleasures. He loved to read, especially books on agriculture and forestry. He had taught himself several modern languages. He liked to inspect his castle and assure himself

that everything was as it was in 'the old days.' But he never left the tower unaccompanied by the squire and closely surrounded by his oldest servants.

"He had one supreme pleasure in his life, the only

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pastime in which he surpassed human beings. In one respect his weakness was his strength, his deformity a triumph. In this unique pleasure he found some compensation for his misery.

"Often, at night, he insisted that we take him to the pond in the maze. There, stripped of his hooded cloak, his only garment in winter and summer, he threw himself into the water. In his natural element, freed of his dual nature, he became again a distant ancestor of the human race. In winter the ice was broken for him. While we stamped our feet and blew on our fingers, he indulged in extraordinary acrobatics and aquatic feats. Sometimes he stayed under water so long that we were afraid he had drowned. Then he would suddenly appear again and jump on the ground, refusing to let the servants dry him.

"He was master of that element from which life arose. He, again, was the distant ancestor who appeared on earth long before Adam was kneaded out of the dust.

"Wrapped in his cloaks, he was taken back to his room in the tower. His bed consisted of a seaweed mattress without pillows, sheets, or blankets. It was on this bed that we laid him day before yesterday; it was there that he dictated his last wishes. 'Bury me in the maze, near the pond where I spent the only happy moments of my life.' "

Gerald fell silent. But I had something more to ask him. As Sir Roger was harmless, even good, why had the baronets never married?

Gerald answered: "Because one must always take into

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account a woman's curiosity. (I knew something about that!) The first baronet of our branch did marry. His wife broke the rule. One night she blew out her candle and opened her door. She saw the horrible face and died during the night after giving birth to a stillborn child."

I realized now that this nerve-racking existence, the danger of a chance meeting, the nocturnal outings, the inexplicable restrictions, were quite incompatible with conjugal life, even in a cottage outside the grounds.

“But tell me, Mrs. Murray, why didn’t Gerald tell you the truth when he broke the engagement?”

“Because of the oath of silence,” Mrs. Murray replied. “The baronets and servants of Craven Castle had all sworn to keep the secret and they kept it.”

“And ... what did Harry Seymour see in the study?”

Mrs. Murray stopped to remember. So many things had happened after that incident.

“In the study? Oh yes, I remember now.

“I told you how careless Gerald was. He had left a treatise on teratology on the table. The book was open at the chapter entitled ‘Of Extraordinary Longevity.’ Harry saw it and guessed the truth.”

It was time to leave. Mrs. Murray looked tired. But I couldn’t go without finding out what happened to Gerald and Kitty. Mrs. Murray guessed my thoughts. She smiled indulgently.

“I revisited Craven Castle many times since then, as the

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guest of a young couple. I often walk in the maze. There, leaning against a grassy mound at the edge of the pond, is a stone slab. It bears the following inscription:

“Here Lies
Sir Roger Philip McTeam
Bart. of Craven
1730-1905.”

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About the Author



Maurice-Yves Sandoz (also Maurice Sandoz; born April 2, 1892 in Basel, died June 5, 1958 in Lausanne) was a Swiss writer. He is considered the most important Swiss storyteller of the fantastic. He is occasionally counted towards surrealism.

Sandoz was a son of Edouard Sandoz, the founder of the Basel Sandoz works, and brother of the sculptor Édouard-Marcel Sandoz. He was also the grandson of the famous surgeon Matthias Mayer and nephew of the painter Emile-François David. This lineage perhaps explains the author's dual scientific and artistic talents, to whom we owe not only works of fiction but also works on spectroscopy and the composition of dyes. He initially worked as a chemist and composer, although he did not actually need a job due to the enormous wealth of his family. An eye disease caused by his research forced him to give up his career as a scientist, but allowed him to put the literary activity, which had previously only been operated as a hobby, at the forefront of his work. Sandoz, who constantly travels the world, had his main residence in Rome. In 1958 he committed suicide.

After the Ronald Firbank-inspired debut *Le jeune auteur et le perroquet* (1920) met with rather moderate acclaim, he published *Souvenirs fantastiques et nouveaux souvenirs* (Eng. *Strange Memories*) in 1937. Characteristic of his narrative technique is that the “natural” explanation that makes the apparently supernatural phenomena rationally

understandable at the end of a story is ultimately even more unbelievable than the assumption of ghostly powers (in this Sandoz approaches the 'explained supernatural' of Ann Radcliffe) - reality turns out to be more fantastic than any fantasy. Each narration takes the form of a fictional private memory of the author, either from his own experiences or from second-hand reports.

Also central is the topos of the haunted house, which varies in the novels *Le labyrinthe* (The Labyrinth, 1949) and *La maison sans fenêtres* (The House Without Windows, 1943) and is associated with the motif of the hedonistic-decadent dandy (not least also a critical examination of one's own lifestyle). *Contes suisses* (Swiss Stories, 1956) is an anthology of older and more recent stories.

Sandoz also endeavored as a playwright: in 1928 a re-imagining of W.G. Willis' play *The Curse of the Wraydons* was published, which served as the basis for a 1946 film of the same name. The play offers a twist on the mythology surrounding Spring Heeled Jack.

Sandoz's books were initially published in very small, exclusive editions, but in a highly luxurious setting; he had them elaborately illustrated by artists such as Fabius von Gugel or Salvador Dalí. Dalí, whom Sandoz met in New York in the 1940s, illustrated e.g. B. Books such as *Souvenirs fantastiques*, *La Maison sans fenêtres*, *Le labyrinthe* and *La Limite* (On the edge, 1951). To this day, Sandoz's work remains largely unknown even to many literary scholars. Only in recent years have some of his stories been republished.

