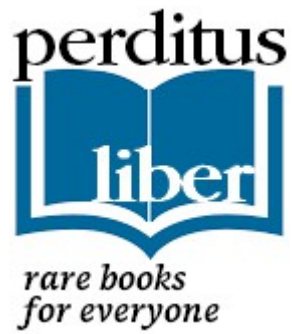


The Metronome



A novel by Frederick H. Romig



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The Metronome

by

Frederick H. Romig

Published 1953

The Metronome

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A Novel by **Frederick H. Romig**



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To
W I L D A
with all my love

The Metronome

Chapter 1

CHICHESTER MOVED THE EMPTY COFFEE cup aside and tore the wrapper from the previous day's Atlanta newspaper. He spread the day-old headlines on the table before him, reviewed them for a few moments, then turned the paper over. Starting at the last page, he methodically worked page by page toward the front, reading in turn the comic section, the sports section, the editorial page, interrupting this sequence only when an illustration or item of interest in the carry-over of a front-page story interested him more than the original headlines had. Even these digressions were stereotyped, for he would invariably read the conclusion of the story, then return to the first page to complete the continuity by reading the first part last. He lingered for several minutes over a syndicated article, the only feature that really justified his subscription, and then, after glancing carelessly over the society section, he put the paper down. But a photograph on that page seemed to strike a familiar chord. He picked up the paper again to assure himself that surely he must have been mistaken. He read the brief announcement below the photograph and absent-mindedly crushed his cigarette in the saucer as the significance of the item

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was slowly but indelibly being impressed upon him. Laboriously and awkwardly he turned the paper inside out and spread it on the table with the picture facing up. He lit a fresh cigarette. "Well, Dr. Rowland," he said, looking purposefully across the table as though the doctor were actually present, "it has happened." He punctuated each word as he slowly reiterated, "Yes. It—actually—has—happened!"

The caption over the photograph simply stated: "Marriage Solemnized on West Coast." This phrase and the few lines printed below the picture were probably read with casual interest by the particular group of subscribers for whom they had been designed. But to Chichester the words were an electric epilogue—a finale in the strange destiny of three people, two of whom he had never known.

For some time he sat looking at the photograph. Idly he toyed with his teaspoon, running his thumb and forefinger down the stem, then inverting

the spoon and repeating the process over and over.

It had been over a year since Dr. Rowland had died, and day by day the memory of the deep friendship that had existed between them had grown dimmer, recalled less often as the doctor's participation in Chichester's life in retrospect had been replaced by the activities and events of the present. Now, this brief society note had revived that memory again. Vividly.

It was surprising that their belated and shortlived friendship should have grown to such proportions, and, Chichester soliloquized, it probably never would have developed at all if it hadn't rained for three consecutive days while they both had been vacationing in Balsam. During this interim the guests at the inn were forced to forsake the outdoor sports and pleasures afforded by the mountains and find diversions in card games and gossip in the hotel lobby or on its spacious veranda. As each dreary, sodden day lingered and struggled into the next, Chichester's nodding-upon-meeting acquaintanceship with the doctor developed progressively. At the end of the third day this

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friendship reached a plane of intimacy that it might not even have approached in years under normal circumstances.

This in itself was not unusual. But the fact that Dr. Rowland had taken him into complete confidence after such a brief acquaintanceship was not exactly routine. Dr. Rowland, like all members of his profession, held inviolate the little intimate details in the private lives of his patients. But to Dr. Rowland it wasn't a matter of professional ethics. It was a philosophy of life. He rarely inquired into the personal affairs of anyone. He liked everyone or appeared to. If a derogatory remark were made about a person in his presence, he would invariably become stonily silent. Then at the first opportunity he would pursue another topic of conversation, usually impersonal. Any confidence imparted to him was a sacred covenant, and by the same token he never condoned in anyone else the violation of a trust. Therefore it was surprising that eventually he violated one. A trust? No. That was hardly a fitting description, for no confidence, professional or personal, had, in this instance, been imparted to him by anyone. Perhaps it was justifiable. At least he had been able to share with someone else the previously undisclosed events that had occurred in the lives of three people. These events had filtered into his hands accidentally and during the years had, indeed, become an obsession with him.

Chichester's meditation was interrupted by the entrance of the cook.

He put his spoon down and looked up. "Well, Gertha," he said, "I guess it's time for you to go home, isn't it?"

"Oh, no, sir, Mr. James," she replied. "I jus' come in to see if you wanted some more coffee."

"No, Gertha. No, I don't think so," Chichester said. "But, come now, what you really wanted to know was whether or not you could go home, wasn't it?"

Gertha chuckled. "No, sir, Mr. James. Not 'specially that," she prevaricated. "I ain't in no hurry."

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"Well, Gertha, you can take my cup now," he said, rising and gathering the remnants of some unopened mail and the newspaper.

When he reached the door Gertha spoke again. "Mr. James," she said.

Chichester turned. "Yes, Gertha?"

"Mr. James, you feelin' well tonight?" she asked.

Chichester looked at her dark frowning face and smiled as he dropped into the vernacular. "Oh, tol'able," he replied. "Why? Do I look sick?"

"No-o," she admitted. "Oh, no sir," she added. "But Mr. James, you seemed to be ponderin' somethin' furious when I come in. I thought maybe you was worryin' or grievin'."

Chichester smiled. "No, Gertha," he replied, "nothing like that. Not worrying or grieving. Just thinking. Thinking about something I read in the newspaper which reminded me of something that happened a long time ago. A very long time ago. That was all."

"Yes, sir," Gertha replied in a tone of disbelief.

She watched his tall figure pass from view down the hallway. Then with a sigh she stacked the dishes and, using a saucer as a crumb tray, brushed some errant crumbs from the table. "Talkin' to hisself," she muttered as she worked. "And out loud too. And to Dr. Rowland, who been dead more'n a year."

At the door to the kitchen she turned and surveyed the dining room to make sure that no chore had been left undone. Then she switched off the light and disappeared into the room beyond.

In the library Chichester turned on a floor lamp and with feline precision settled into the cushions of a chair in front of the fireplace.

The pieces of mail he had brought from the dining room were composed mostly of circulars that went into routine discard. Each letter was wadded absent-mindedly in his right hand while he read and considered its successor, and in this order he cast them one by one into the fire. When the last letter had

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been consumed he lit a cigarette and picked up the newspaper.

For a long time he studied the picture of the beautiful woman, carefully analyzing and reviving the familiar features. "So, it's Mrs. Tyndall now," he murmured. He threw the match which he still held in his hand into the fire and watched it disappear among the burning logs. "Mrs. Tyndall," he repeated slowly, over and over as though he were practicing a phrase to overcome its awkward newness by repetition.

At length he put down the paper and picked up a book that he had previously placed on a table beside him. Minutes passed. A log in the fireplace broke and tumbled to the hearth floor. He rose and placed another in its place across the andirons, sat down again, and picked up the book. But as he progressed slowly from page to page, he gradually became aware that, although his eyes were reading the printed characters, actually he wasn't reading at all—that his mind was being carried away from the book in a surging tempest, swept along by thoughts far more powerful than the printed words. He found it necessary to reread every line, driving himself to concentrate on the text, and finally, in resignation, he closed the book and placed it on the table beside him.

He reached up and pulled the light cord. In the semigloom his face became an obscure and distorted object of flame and shadow. He sat watching the smoke from his cigarette drift lazily toward the fireplace, then gradually gather momentum as the attraction of the flames increased, and suddenly sweep from sight up the chimney.

Chichester, reviewing some of the events that appeared to be simple and commonplace at the time, nevertheless, felt that it was singular that they——He snapped his fingers. Yes, he realized that was it! Dr. Rowland may have been setting the stage that very morning—the morning the rain had ceased.

Still, Chichester wondered exactly what had prompted the doctor to share his cherished covenant. Conversations, like water, usually flow

naturally from one channel to another, from tributary to tributary, unless, of course, the flow has been intentionally

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diverted. So, as Chichester tried to retrace the events of that day, he wondered if the various topics of conversation had merely drifted from one subject to another or if the astute doctor had guided the conversation just to make it appear that way. That, of course, Chichester felt, he would never really know.

On that particular morning they had been standing at the east end of the hotel veranda. In the slowly gathering light it was still debatable whether the rain they could still hear falling was bona fide or merely the result of the wind shaking surplus moisture from the trees. Therefore it pleased them when the gray sky behind the mountains slowly opened fanwise into the receding darkness and gradually became bluer until, at last, the sun pushed itself into view.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Dr. Rowland commented.

“Yes,” Chichester agreed, “isn’t it?” His eyes strayed upward toward Old Bald, toward the grass-covered, tree-fringed dome by which the huge mountain identified itself and from which it got its name. In the increasing sunlight the moving wraiths of mist around its heights approached translucence, alternately revealing and concealing the summit as though guided by the hands of an invisible magician.

Dr. Rowland looked up at the other man and then followed the direction of his gaze. “Do you know, Chichester,” he said, “I never get tired of these hills. They seem to be cloaked in mystery. Always beckoning. Luring you, defying you to climb their heights and find out what is beyond and what is concealed from your eyes.” He looked up at the sky. “Well,” he observed, “it does look as though, at last, we may be able to get out of this place today.”

“I hope so,” Chichester remarked. “Another day of this rain and I’m afraid you’d probably have had to treat me for claustrophobia.”

Dr. Rowland smiled. “Not that bad. Was it?” he asked.

“I’m afraid so, Doctor. I was beginning to get what in modem parlance is referred to as the jitters.”

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Dr. Rowland looked at him and grinned. "That sounds bad, Chichester, but *I* think you'll live."

"Reckon?"

"Oh, sure. But first I would prescribe some breakfast."

"And that's one prescription, Doctor, that will be followed to the letter, I assure you. And one," he added, with a smile, "even I shall be able to read."

Dr. Rowland ignored the last remark, and Chichester was sorry that he had made the facetious comment.

Chichester recalled that after breakfast they had returned to the veranda.

They smoked and chatted for some time and with boyish interest watched two locomotives pulling a long string of log-laden flatcars up the punishing grade to the railroad station a hundred feet below the hotel. As the cars were eased into the siding the blasts of steam subsided into relieved and sibilant breathing.

"I believe," Dr. Rowland observed, "that I work as hard as those locomotives do to bring that train up the grade. I'm usually quite exhausted by the time they reach the top."

"Maybe that's what helps them make it," Chichester suggested.

"Maybe so. Maybe so," Dr. Rowland replied. "I've been watching them for years, and the only time they failed to make the grade was once when *I* wasn't there."

Chichester smiled. He watched an automobile enter the roadway beyond the railroad and quickly wind upward. It disappeared among the trees, and from force of habit he turned his eyes toward a point a mile or so to the right and far above the hotel where, after an extended interlude, he was rewarded by another brief view of the car as it slowly wound around a red clay shelf on the mountainside. He was about to speak to the doctor when the silence was broken by the sound of voices from the recesses of the hotel, becoming louder as they approached the entrance.

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A group of young people came out on the veranda laughing and talking. Some of the voices rose above the confused chatter and drifted down the veranda to where the two men sat.

"Where is Margaret?" one voice asked.

"I don't know," another replied.

"Whose car are we going in?"

“Walter’s.”

“If that’s the case, we’d better take money for gas.”

“Meta, you better wear a sweater. You’ll freeze up there.”

Dr. Rowland rose. “Excuse me, Chichester,” he said. “I’ll be back directly.”

Chichester watched him as he walked toward the entrance of the hotel. “You young folks can surely make a lot of fuss,” Dr. Rowland said, smiling as he neared the door.

“Hyah, Doc. You’d better join us,” one young man invited.

Dr. Rowland scratched his head. “You know, Walter, I’d like to. But I’m afraid that I’m one of those people that were born thirty years too soon.”

“Aw, Doc, that ain’t the way I heard it.” He took Dr. Rowland’s arm. “C’mon. We may need you professionally before the day is done.”

Dr. Rowland laughed. “What you’ll need is a chiropodist,” he said, “not a medical man.” He slapped the boy on the shoulder. “Now all of you get off. If you hadn’t stayed up so late last night you might have been gone long ago.”

A buxom little girl lingered and came up to Dr. Rowland and toyed with a button on his sweater-coat. She looked up at him. Doctor, please, I wish you would go, so much.” Her guttural voice was sincerely pleading.

“No, Meta,” he said, putting his arm around her shoulder and leading her toward the stairway. “Young people should be with young people, and old people should not forget it. Now you go along and have a good time and maybe you can lose a little of that weight you are always worrying about.”

Meta looked up at him a moment. Then slowly and disconsolately she descended the stairs to the walk toward the

driveway and joined the other young people who had preceded her.

Dr. Rowland watched the group going to their cars with interest—an interest in the distribution of the six couples and any summer romances that might be in process. He smiled as he watched and was about to turn, when his eyes fell upon a small boy who was watching this departure. The boy’s reaction was in direct contrast to the doctors.

“Why, Frankie, aren’t you going on the hike?” Dr. Rowland asked.

“Naw,” Frankie answered. “I backed out when they told me they were taking girls.” His tone was impregnated with the disdain that precedes

adolescence. He spoke without looking at Dr. Rowland, and instead focused his attention on the sexual traitors below the veranda.

“But, Frankie,” Dr. Rowland objected, “you shouldn’t feel like that. Tell me just exactly what is wrong with taking girls on a hike?”

“Aw, nothin’, I guess,” Frankie replied. “But they just can’t do nothin’ for themselves. You have to hold branches up for them to walk under and help them across creeks over rocks. They’re just plain helpless. That’s all. It’s just no place for dames.”

“Dames?”

“Well-girls.”

Dr. Rowland looked closely at the boy. “Well, Frankie, maybe you’re right, but that’s the way girls and ladies are, and that’s the reason we’re here—to help them do the things they can’t do for themselves, and even sometimes help them do the things that they can do for themselves, just to make them think that they can’t. You’ll have lots of other men to help you with the branches and stepping stones, I think. Anyway, the dames, as you call them, have a man apiece to take care of them.”

He hailed and stopped the cars that were just pulling off and with some difficulty moved a reluctant Frankie down the walk toward the driveway, remonstrating with him further as

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they walked along. “Walter, I’ve got a chaperon for you,” he announced as he approached the first car.

His statement met with sullen silence. Walter glanced at the passengers crowded in the tonneau. “Okay, Doc,” he conceded. “Frankie, come on. You can ride up here in front with Ruth and me.”

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Chapter 2

WITH THE DEPARTURE OF THE YOUNG people, the hotel subsided to its usual atmosphere of tranquility. Dr. Rowland took a pipe from his pocket. As he meticulously filled the bowl and tamped down the tobacco, he remarked: "You know, Chichester, if it weren't for young people there wouldn't be much enjoyment in growing old." As he spoke, he indicated with his pipestem the direction in which the two automobiles had just disappeared.

Chichester smiled vaguely. "I thought it was just the other way around—that at the approach of old age people were prone to envy youth."

"Bah!" snorted Dr. Rowland. "Of course, we all know that old age is inevitable and irreparable—that is, except some old fossils who postpone their youth until they miss the train, and then try to catch it and find out they can't outrun it but still keep on chasing it like a fool dog after an automobile. But for us who grow old realistically and intelligently life would have little remaining value if it did not include the lives of young people. It would be just as uninteresting as a climate of late falls and winters and would rob us of the enjoyment of watching the development of our seed and the seed of our seed."

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"You may be right, doctor," Chichester replied. "However, I had never thought of it in just that way. But, on the other hand, doesn't that rather refute what you said to the little girl out here a while ago? I couldn't help overhearing."

"What was that?" Dr. Rowland asked.

"Oh, about young people being with young people and old folks staying at home—with old folks."

Dr. Rowland idly tapped his pipestem on his lower teeth. "Yes," he said, "I did say that, and I meant it. We don't necessarily have to intrude on their lives to enjoy them, any more than we have to become one of the characters in a novel to enjoy it and become a part of it."

"Yes, I guess you're right," Chichester admitted. Then, suddenly changing the subject, he said: "By the way, doctor, that little girl—Meta, I believe you called her—is a foreigner, isn't she?"

“Yes, she is. From Poland. Refugee. She doesn’t talk about it, though. All that I know is that her father was a doctor in Warsaw. He’s still there as far as she knows. She hasn’t heard from him or about him for some time. Nevertheless, she is quite philosophical about it all. Breeding, you know. Yes, Chichester, Meta is quite a little girl, and I am very fond of her, and she’s quite a linguist, too—speaks French and German passably, in addition to her native tongue and English. I imagine that that is more essential over there than it would be here.”

“Yes, I would presume so,” Chichester said. “The contiguity of the various nations speaking such a variety of languages must make it almost imperative, especially if anyone traveled to any extent. I’ve often wondered, though, why so many of these refugees are so reticent about discussing their experiences. Is it because it is particularly distasteful to them?”

Dr. Rowland took a box of matches from his pocket and relit his pipe as he considered the other man’s question. “Perhaps, but not altogether,” he replied. “They can’t quite conquer that element of fear, it seems. I have often noticed that upon frequent occasions Meta speaks as though she is afraid she may

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be overheard. And then again, I believe they find it difficult to co-ordinate their reasoning in such a way as to reconcile themselves to the fact that it all did actually happen. Here, they are so remote from those experiences that they lose realism, and their past all becomes a sort of nightmare that they would prefer to delete from their lives—force forgetfulness—perhaps. That isn’t unreasonable. We all have incidents in our past, I believe, that we too should, and probably do, treat in just that manner.”

Chichester waited for Dr. Rowland to continue, but when the other man revealed no intention of resuming, he said: “There is quite a bit in what you say, doctor. I imagine that it might surprise people if they only knew some of the things that are buried with our bodies. Secrets. Intrigues. Loves. Hates. Aspirations. Many things like that are interred with us that we never reveal to anyone—even to those who are very close and dear to us. I’ve often thought of that.”

Dr. Rowland looked at him sharply for a moment and then turned and idly contemplated the pine-covered hills in the distance. “That sounds like something from Gray’s *Elegy in a Country Churchyard*,” he commented,

drawing a heavy gold watch from the vest under his sweater-coat. “Well, I guess I’ll go up and take a look at my ‘chateau’—six rooms and bath. Won’t you join me? We can walk up there and easily be back in time for lunch.”

Chichester looked at his watch as he considered the invitation. “Yes, Doctor,” he said, “I think I’d like to go. I had planned to drive up to Asheville, but really this hike with you appeals to me. Yes, I’ll go.”

“Fine! Just wait for me a moment until I get my walking stick. We ‘Swiss,’ you know, accept winter, spring, and summer, but we just don’t like early falls,” he punned facetiously. Then, becoming serious, he said: “I’ll be right with you.”

After the doctor went, Chichester lit a cigarette. He observed, in abstraction, a transition or rather a metamorphosis that had taken place on the mountain across the valley. Last night scattered lights had feebly flickered among the trees, making the

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mountain resemble a huge but impoverished Christmas tree. Today, in the blaze of sunlight, there was nothing to indicate the presence of human life. Last night each light revealed a home on the hillside—homes that were no different from those on an open prairie. Yet today those homes had vanished, enshrouded by the balsams and pines on the mountainside. And then Dr. Rowland came out on the veranda. “Shall we go?” he asked.

Although the road on the other side of the valley was not particularly steep, the ascent was continuous and fatiguing. As a result, at regular intervals they stopped and discussed the ever-spreading panorama below, which was usually of no particular interest. These pauses were, in reality, periods of rest, which relieved each man alternately of a weariness he felt but would not readily acknowledge.

At length the road entered a sylvan tunnel, and shortly they emerged into dazzling sunlight. Below them a mountain stream noisily bounced downward toward the valley. The road turned abruptly to the left, straddled the stream over a rustic bridge, then returned along the opposite bank. From there it forged upward, and retreated from the stream as it rose. Dr. Rowland stopped and pointed his cane toward the bluff above. “There she is, Chichester,” he screamed above the roar of the water. “The buzzard’s roost.”

It was a short but precipitous climb that brought them to this shoulder that jutted from the mountainside. A limerock house, nearing completion, spread its roof over a porch that commanded the valley in three directions like a citadel.

Dr. Rowland, with surprising rejuvenation, showed Chichester around the house, pointing out certain features that had been included for comfort and convenience. It was a house to be admired, and Chichester expressed his admiration without restraint.

“What a superb location!” he commented. “And the view!— beyond description.”

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“Thank you. I think so,” Dr. Rowland agreed.

A carpenter called from the kitchen, and while Dr. Rowland was engaged with the workman, Chichester walked out on to the porch and down the steps to a grove of balsam. He picked up an empty nail keg and took it near the edge of the bluff above the road, lit a cigarette, and calmly waited.

When Dr. Rowland joined him, he, too, had a nail keg in his hand. He went through the meticulous process of lighting his pipe, and for some time the men smoked in contented silence. At length Chichester spoke.

“Do you know, Doctor, I thought that the hotel had quite an elevation from the roadbed of the railroad, but as I look down on it over there I can hardly realize that we have climbed this high.”

Dr. Rowland studied the distant roof of the hotel. “Misleading, isn’t it? I don’t know what our exact elevation is here, but it’s quite obvious that it’s somewhat higher than the hotel down yonder. After all, you must remember—at least I do—that almost every step that we took on our little hike was upward.”

Chichester sighed. “How well I remember.”

He looked down on the road below, a mere shelf protected only by a guard rail from an abrupt drop to the valley below. “Sinister,” he remarked. “Sinister and almost the ideal spot a mystery writer might select for a murder. It almost seems to invite murder, doesn’t it?”

Dr. Rowland’s eyes traveled down the slope following the other man’s gaze. “That’s a rather morbid thought, Chichester. But I must admit that it would. Just as much as the view from the roof of a skyscraper gives some people an urge to commit self-destruction.”

“As I was sitting here alone,” Chichester remarked, “I could not help feeling the quiet and peacefulness of all this.” He swept bony fingers toward the valley below them. “I imagine,” he resumed, “serene would describe it better. It would be difficult to imagine anything ever happening here. Why, in some

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respects it has a feeling that it is almost uninhabited. It all looks, from its monotonous day-by-day existence, as though it could never experience any of the vicissitudes. And yet——”

“Yes, Chichester,” Dr. Rowland interrupted, “it would seem so, wouldn’t it? But its primeval beauty can be misleading. There is a lure to these hills. As you said a while ago, they invite tragedy and mystery, or rather imply it. You felt it then. I feel it often. For it reminds me, Chichester, of an incident _____”

Chichester waited. When Dr. Rowland gave no indication of continuing he said, “Yes?”

Dr. Rowland’s gaze turned toward the red roof of the hotel below them. “I’m sorry,” he apologized. “I have made a solemn vow to myself that I would never reveal that incident to anyone—that is, as I know it. It so happens that it is the story of another person’s life in which I played the role of spectator, and to a rather small degree, I am sure. As far as I know, I _____”

The sentence remained unfinished. Dr. Rowland studied the valley below them. Chichester’s gaze followed the other man’s. He lit a cigarette and inserted it in its holder.

“I think I understand,” he commented just to break the silence.

“I hardly believe that you could, Chichester,” Dr. Rowland replied. He studied the other man closely. Chichester had been only a nodding acquaintance for the past week at the hotel, when they had met casually in the dining-room, in the lobby, or on the terrace. Yet, since the rains, and since they had taken this hike together, Dr. Rowland felt that he had come to know him very well. As he sat in contemplation he reviewed the incidents that had led to this companionship.

Chichester was smoking and looking far out into the valley. A car moved slowly along the road below them, sounding its horn in warning to any invisible vehicle that might be approaching from the opposite direction

around the bluff. From behind came the sound of hammers and saws as piece by piece raw materials were converted into the finished product.

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“Chichester,” Dr. Rowland said.

“Yes, Doctor,” the other man replied, turning toward him.

“What I started to tell you was about a tragedy that did occur here.”

“Yes?”

“The tragedy, as it *is* known, is no secret. In fact, it is common knowledge. But there is another tragedy behind that tragedy, of which, I am sure, I am the only one who has any knowledge. As I told you, I made a solemn vow that I would never reveal it, for reasons that happen to be mine alone. Nevertheless, during the past year I’ve often felt the burden of not being able to share my knowledge of the facts surrounding that tragedy. In the event I should die the facts would die with me. Then, perhaps, every vestige of protection I had guarded with secrecy might be destroyed by circumstances of which even I am not aware at the present moment. Some of the principals are now dead, and those who are alive could not be identified by you, anyway. You may eventually meet one or two of these people, but I have a feeling that I can trust you implicitly, especially after you have heard the story. You do not appear to me as the prying sort or the type that would betray a confidence.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Chichester said. “But, if you have the slightest trepidation in telling me—well, I’d rather you wouldn’t, you know.”

Dr. Rowland considered this for a moment. “No, Chichester. I don’t think that I shall have the slightest trepidation.” He spoke slowly and thoughtfully.

“You see, Chichester, this happened two years ago. I intend to retire next year, and that is one of the reasons I’m building this.” He indicated the house behind them. “I’ve been coming up here each summer for—I would judge—twenty years, and I’ve been practicing medicine in Atlanta for a considerably longer time than that. My practice has been a good one, but I am ready now to relinquish it to a younger man.

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“Well, sir, let me see—it must have been nine years ago— yes, it was nine years ago that I first met them....”

When I opened the door of my office for them, the woman entered first. The little girl followed and quietly took a chair in the corner of the office. I invited the woman to have a chair beside my desk.

The woman immediately suggested that she should give me her case history, which, of course, I should have requested during the course of my diagnosis. During the interview I learned that she was Mrs. Agnes Mulholland, a widow for the past three years. She had had but one child, the little girl Christine, who was approaching her thirteenth year. I recall as I wrote this down that I glanced at Christine and she smiled at me—one of those childish, indulgent smiles, you know. They had moved from New York recently and were now making their home in Atlanta. Just why, she didn't say, nor did I ask.

As my questions led into a more intimate vein, I suggested that it might be advisable for the little girl to retire to the reception room. But she said: "No. It's quite all right." Under these circumstances I glanced at the little girl from time to time, but her interest at most could have been called only perfunctory.

Agnes Mulholland was a fragile woman. Somehow she reminded me of expensive china. And, as with well-turned china, her daintiness lent to her beauty a charm befitting the breeding that impressed you too. She gave me her age as thirty-one, and I doubt if she were older.

During the next two years I saw them both quite often. Agnes' ailment, though not serious, was of a chronic type that demanded regular observation.

With these frequent visits I gradually assumed a position of family counselor as well as that of a medical adviser. That often happens. For some reason I took a keener interest in them personally than I did in my other patients. My only explanation can be that they both seemed so alone in the world; it was just the

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natural thing to do. However, they appeared to have no financial worries. A doctor is usually the first creditor to be affected when people are in financial straits. They lived in an apartment in the more or less fashionable Druid Hills section, and, although the furniture was probably not the most expensive, it revealed good taste.

In the second year, by mere chance, Mrs. Rowland met them, and as if by magic an intimate friendship resulted. The friendship between the two

women grew sincerely intimate, and, needless to say, it was pleasing to me. I have entertained little doubt that the vivacious Christine played an important role in this association. The two women and the little girl were inseparable. It seemed to me that it was just a continuous series of matinées, shopping tours, and general activities. I am afraid that Mrs. Rowland allowed her other social duties to suffer miserably. But I didn't object. I had never cared much for them, anyway—bridge parties and teas always seemed rather trite to me.

The summer after they met, Mrs. Rowland, Agnes, and Christine came up here to spend a vacation and were later joined by my nephew Edgar, the son of my wife's sister. Edgar is a nice young chap. He was attending the University of Georgia at the time and had his heart set on becoming a certified public accountant. I recall now that at the dinner table, or wherever we might happen to be, he invariably spoke of his plans, sometimes to the point where I was afraid it might drive people to distraction. On one occasion I mildly reprimanded him for it.

"Oh, Dr. Rowland," Agnes objected, "do let Edgar speak. Please. I enjoy listening to him. I really do."

Apparently she did, for I often found them on the hotel veranda alone. I noticed that with shrewd feminine logic she encouraged him to talk about himself, leading him with questions and simulating interest. Of course, he became very fond of her.

Upon our return to Atlanta, the resumption of the pleasures we had previously enjoyed was to be shortlived. It seems that

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extreme happiness always is. That winter Agnes contracted a cold, and because she knew I was extremely busy and it was a mere cold, she didn't call me immediately. When it finally became necessary for her to be confined to her bed, she reluctantly had Christine telephone, and I drove out to the apartment.

Christine met me at the door, and by the concern that showed in her eyes and drawn face, I knew that she was extremely worried. Agnes was running an elevated temperature. Dangerously high. The mere cold had developed into a severe case of influenza. Being aware of her delicate constitution, I readily realized the gravity of the case and immediately engaged two registered nurses. From that time on I spent every moment that I could

spare with her. But my worst fears were to materialize. She contracted pneumonia.

On several occasions during her illness she wished to speak to me, I know. She realized, as I did, that death was imminent. However, on each occasion she apparently changed her mind and her eyes would turn to the ceiling to study feverish patterns in the wallpaper.

As the end drew near, Christine, Mrs. Rowland, and I were in the room around her bed. The nurse on duty thoughtfully remained in the background. Agnes looked from one to another, smiling—a smile weak from the ravages of the disease that was so definitely taking her away from us. “Doctor,” she whispered.

“Yes, Agnes,” I said. I had to bend low to hear her.

But she never continued. Instead, she looked longingly at Christine, and shortly afterward she died, one hand in mine, the other in Christine’s. As the last breath passed from her lips, I leaned over her chest. The only sound in the room was Christine’s soft sobbing. When I looked up, Mrs. Rowland was gently leading the child from the room with an arm around her shoulders.

Chapter 3

DR. ROWLAND PAUSED AS HE NOTICED Chichester fumbling through his pockets. "Here, have a match," he said, passing the other man a match-box. "You may keep them, Chichester; I believe I have some more."

"Thank you, Doctor," Chichester said.

Both men smoked and, without a comment, watched the passenger train from Asheville pull into the station, looking much like a toy from their point of observation. In a few moments the blasts from the locomotive echoed through the hills and the cars disappeared from view. Dr. Rowland laid his cane on the ground and continued speaking:

As I said, she died without revealing more than she had already told me. She did have the foresight to make a will, and I was named executor. The estate was not large, but sufficient; that is, there were ample funds to continue Christine's education in comfort.

The night that Agnes died, Mrs. Rowland and I took Christine to our home to remain until we could locate her mothers relatives. This was a search that was to prove absolutely futile.

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From Christine I learned that Agnes' maiden name was Grayson. She informed me that the residence of her grandparents, long since deceased, had been a little town not far from New York. Christine was very vague about her grandparents. It was odd, she admitted, but they were almost strangers. Her visits with them had been brief as well as infrequent. But inasmuch as they were no longer alive, I made every effort that I could to locate any other blood relatives that she might still have. I consulted the authorities in that town, wrote letters to the ministers of the churches, and finally located the church the Graysons had attended. The results were always the same. The only relatives I could determine she had were her maternal grandparents, and, as I have said, they were dead.

On the day before the funeral I questioned Christine again in an effort to find some possible clue to any relatives, maternal or paternal, that might exist, because, if there ever had been an orphan, she really seemed to be

one. But she shook her head and said, “Docs, I don’t know of a soul other than grandmother and grandfather and I didn’t see enough of them to get acquainted, really. Mummie used to go up there quite often, but she didn’t take me but just a few times. Docs, there always seemed to be school, and during the holidays we usually left town—to the Catskills or some place.”

I asked her about her father—whether he didn’t have some relatives. But she said that she didn’t think so, not in this country anyway. He had been English. He had spoken of England often, but it had all been in generalities, nothing definite. The only time that her father and mother had gone abroad together, Christine had been in boarding school. I consulted this school and, of course, its records disclosed the parents’ names, but no other vital information.

It all seemed very strange that a child born of good family in an environment perhaps just a little above the average should be so utterly marooned from kith and kin. I satisfied myself that I had really made a conscientious effort to find her family. Deep down in my heart, though, I knew that I didn’t want her to

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leave. During these years I had become very devoted to her, and not to have had someone calling me “Docs” any more would have deprived me of an affection to which I had become quite accustomed.

Several months later I became her legal guardian.

(Dr. Rowland paused and knocked the ashes from his pipe on the heel of his shoe. “Chichester, I wonder if I could have one of your cigarettes?”

“Certainly, Doctor.” Chichester handed him a package that was rapidly becoming depleted.

“I’m not boring you, I hope?” Dr. Rowland remarked.

“Not at all, Doctor. On the contrary, I find all this most fascinating.”

Dr. Rowland lit a cigarette. “I was afraid that I might,” he observed. “You see, I have a penchant for slipping off on prolonged and boring dissertations.”)

As time passed, the death of Agnes created quite a transition in our lives. A home that had never been blessed with children was brightened by an adolescent daughter. And when I say “brightened” I mean that literally.

She was a popular girl, and that popularity was well founded. She was unassuming, unselfish, and a perfect little hostess. The house that had ordinarily been more or less quiet became the scene of many voices and much laughter—a bedlam of young people. I never realized how important unimportant things could be until my home was invaded by these teenagers: the latest moving pictures, dance orchestras, and singers appeared to dominate the conversation.

At first all this annoyed me immensely. It is rather difficult for older people to orientate themselves to sudden changes. I had been accustomed to quiet evenings in the living room, reading, while Mrs. Rowland crocheted. Now I had to confine this form of leisure, if any, to the seclusion of my study. However, it wasn't long before my recreational reading was almost entirely

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sacrificed for the more fascinating pleasure of being a spectator in the living room or in its immediate vicinity.

Of course, these little girls had their quarrels and jealousies. Their discussions of boys' merits as potential beaux, I recall, often drew a quiet chuckle from me. During those days the moths that may have been so unfortunate as to reside in our living-room rug must have had a trying existence, for it was almost daily rolled against a wall to make room for dancing and then rolled back again. This chore, incidentally, usually represented my only participation in these parties.

Shortly after Christine came to live with us Mrs. Rowland, by a natural transition, became "Mother Rowland," but I always remained just "Docs." I can see Christine now in those early days—a beautiful child with brown hair and large brown eyes, not dreamy and not saucy, but always alert. She was obedient, but on the other hand gave early indications of developing quite a will of her own. But those eyes—she talked as much with them as she did with her mouth, which was mighty keen competition, I assure you.

(Dr. Rowland smiled contemplatively before he resumed.)

The report cards I received from the high school were not the type that proud parents ordinarily display to bored friends, but they weren't bad. She was just a normal student.

Little by little she picked up the threads of her broken life, and Mrs. Rowland was adroit in making this possible. Without seeming to drive Christine toward those activities that would make her forget the loss of her mother and defeat the purpose by making her intentions obvious, Mrs. Rowland guided the girl back to normal in easy stages. It was this tactful method she was employing that caused her to delay the possible fulfillment of one of Agnes' deepest desires—that Christine should study piano.

Several months after Christine became a member of our family I became aware that Mrs. Rowland was attending piano

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recitals and symphony concerts with more than ordinary regularity and was occasionally taking Christine with her. But so many new things had been happening that I just accepted the musical trend as another innovation. Even though I had lived with Mrs. Rowland long enough to have suspected, it wasn't until Christine—cooly, I know she thought—began talking piano and music morning, noon, and night that I became a partner in this enthusiasm and suggested that she take piano lessons. I realized that my suggestion was actually designed by the artful Mrs. Rowland. And I believe I became aware for the first time that after our long marriage perhaps some of the ideas I had proposed in the past had not been as original as I had believed them to be.

We purchased a beautiful instrument—a baby grand, I believe it was—and engaged one of the best teachers I could find in Atlanta. But although Christine loved music and did not lack a good sense of rhythm, for some reason she just could not interpret it on the piano. There are people like that. It was discouraging to watch her struggle and struggle with the exercises. She almost became a martyr to the piano. In this connection an incident occurred that did not seem important at the time, but it was to afflict her with an odd complex—a form of neurosis that haunts her upon occasion even to this day.

One day not long after she had started her study of music I happened to pass a music store downtown. A metronome displayed in the window attracted my attention, and the vision of her struggling with her exercises the previous evening flashed before me. I felt that it might be the solution for her, so I purchased it. She was thrilled when I brought it home, as she was whenever I brought her anything, and it did help her playing.

I remember that evening well. While Christine played, Mrs. Rowland sat in one corner of the living room crocheting and I sat in another corner smoking, feeling that I had really accomplished something. Christine's attitude had graduated from discouragement to comparative enthusiasm. Now and then Mrs.

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Rowland would look up from her crocheting at the little girl at the piano. Then her eyes would meet mine, and she would smile and nod her approval.

Several days later, early in the afternoon, I was in my study reading. I had left Christine in the living room practicing. Mrs. Rowland was out, and the only sound I could hear in the study was the music of the Barcarolle from *The Tales of Hoffmann* coming from below. Subconsciously I was impressed with the improvement in her playing.

Suddenly the piano crashed with a resounding and discordant crescendo that startled me. I placed my book on the desk and listened in wonder. Immediately afterwards I heard her run up the stairs and enter her room. The door slammed with violence. Such behavior was so extraordinary that I left the study and walked down the hallway to her door. I knocked, but there was no answer. I slowly turned the knob and pushed the door open.

Christine was lying across the bed, face down, crying as though her heart were broken. I went in and sat on the edge of the bed beside her and rested a hand on her shoulder. "Christine, darling," I said, "what *is* the trouble, child?"

"Docs!" she cried, "I can't stand it! I just can't stand it!" As she spoke, she beat the mattress with her fists.

"Can't stand what?" I asked. "Christine, what do you mean?"

"That metronome, Docs," she replied. "I tell you, Docs, I just can't stand it another minute."

This sudden outburst had confused me. Now, the reason she gave for it confused me more. My impression had been that she was extremely pleased with the metronome. "The metronome, Christine?" I asked. "I don't believe that I understand. Tell me, darling, what's the matter with the metronome?"

She sat up on the edge of the bed beside me. I gave her a handkerchief. She dried her eyes, and I made her blow her nose. I waited as she tried to gain control of the hysterics that shook her body.

"Docs," she sobbed, "you must think that I'm terribly unappreciative."

“Christine, you know that I don’t think anything like that,”

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I answered. “But tell me, child, what’s bothering you? I’d like to know.”

“Docs,” she replied, “I don’t think you’ll understand. It will seem silly to you. But regardless of what I play on the piano, that metronome seems to keep beating over and over the rhythm of that horrible dirge they played at Mummie’s funeral. I just can’t stand it, Docs. I tell you, *I just cant stand it!*”

We sat for a long time on the edge of her bed. Her head was cradled on my shoulder and I calmly waited for her sobbing to subside. She was a pitiful little figure, Chichester, and I believe that actually for the first time I realized how all alone she really was.

Finally, I left her room. I went downstairs to the living room and walked over to the piano. I turned the cover down over the keyboard and took the metronome and placed it in a storage room, just off the kitchen.

I discussed the incident with Mrs. Rowland that night. We did not encourage her music further, and I don’t believe she ever touched the keys again. However, it was not to be the last we were ever to hear of a metronome.

In the ensuing year we were to experience two more changes in our household. We had another addition to our family group, and then—a departure.

In June Edgar received his degree and came to live with us. His mother lived in Brunswick, and he debated whether he should try to find a position in Jacksonville or in Atlanta. I prevailed upon him to come and live with us, because I felt that Atlanta offered better opportunities in his particular field.

It was a very gratifying arrangement. An affinity grew between Christine and Edgar which was akin to a brother-and-sister relationship. His exaggerated youthful dignity and her piquancy contributed toward congeniality, even probably more than an actual brother-and-sister relationship might have. I often thought how fortunate we were to have a family without the care that is incurred in rearing little children.

Immediately after Edgar joined us he, Mrs. Rowland, and Christine came up here to the mountains for a short vacation.

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When they returned, Edgar tried to make a connection in public accounting, but as it was summertime, the slack period in that profession, he was unsuccessful. Instead he secured an accounting position with a large national mercantile company.

It pleased me to note the little ways in which he was attentive to Christine—bringing her candy, taking her to pictures, and introducing her to his friends. Just a big brother looking out for his little sister. We were a happy family group. Perhaps it was pretending a little, but it was all very real to us and very pleasant. Mrs. Rowland neglected practically all her social obligations again, other than the church, and devoted herself almost entirely to her adoptive family.

Our life was quite uneventful until one day in December. I was in my room dressing for dinner when I heard Edgar rush into the house. The door slammed. I heard him coming up the stairs, two steps at a time. He didn't observe the usual formality of knocking on my door, but rushed right into the room. I recall now that I was engaged in the third provoking attempt to fix my tie, which had been very obstinate and refused to knot neatly. Therefore I was already rather annoyed, and when Edgar burst into the room I was about to remonstrate with him, but his expression forestalled that. However, I did say: "Well, young man, if this keeps up, I may be able to dispense with the stairway entirely. Steps don't seem to mean anything to you."

"I'm sorry, Uncle Dennis," he said, gasping for breath after each word. "I guess I'm a bit excited. But," he continued, "I've got such good news. It just wouldn't keep."

"Good news?" I asked. "Is that all? To me it sounds as though it should be sensational."

"Oh, it is!" he exclaimed.

"Well," I said, "let's have it. I'm getting hungry."

"Uncle Dennis," he said, "I start with Woolsey and Prescott Monday morning."

"Is that so?" I replied. "And where are they going and just who might they be?"

"Uncle Dennis!" he exclaimed. "Don't tell me that you've never heard of *Woolsey and Prescott*! Why, they're just about the foremost public accounting firm in Atlanta."

“Well,” I said, “that *is* news, Edgar. Let me be the first to congratulate you. I’m really proud of you and I wish you all the luck in the world. Let’s sit down. I want to hear more about all this.”

I’m afraid that I really forgot about the appetite I had formerly mentioned as I became a party to all the enthusiasm about his ambitions—how he intended to continue his studies and take the examination; how, after he got his certificate, he might become a member of the firm or, even better, might start a practice of his own. As I sat and listened to him, I little doubted that he would accomplish these things. He did have a level head, even though at the moment he seemed to have lost it.

Later, when he had progressed in his chosen profession, this enthusiasm never abated, and, like people who really love their work, he, I am proud to say, has succeeded.

Well, Chichester, we all shared in Edgar’s good fortune. Evenings when we gathered around the dinner table Edgar invariably recounted the activities of his day. Christine usually asked simple, yet intelligent questions about his work, with which she, of course, was unacquainted.

Christine often spent most of the dinner hour divided between the chair at the table and the chair at the telephone stand in the hall. It seemed to me that all her friends selected that particular time to do their telephoning. I recall I used to tease her and suggested that she eat before the rest of us so that we could all enjoy dessert at the same time. I further remember Mrs. Rowland’s indirectly rebuking me by saying to Christine: “Now, Christine, you just take all the time you want. If the doctor wishes to eat dessert with you, he can wait. After all,” she added with a smile, “his patients wait for him all day.”

Christmas and the joyous New Year swept by, and life glided on until the sixth of February.

I was at the office when Christine called. “Docs,” she exclaimed,

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“hurry home! Hurry, please! Something terrible has happened to Mother Rowland.”

But despite my haste, I was destined to lose a doctor’s eternal race. Mrs. Rowland passed away before I arrived. It was her heart. We were all grief-stricken beyond comprehension, for, although she had been of the retiring sort, yet she had always participated in our activities in her own inimitable manner, inconspicuous to the point where you felt that she was almost as

invisible as the wiring without which you knew there could be no light in a house.

We laid her to rest next to Agnes, and the two women who had grown so fond of each other in the twilight of their lives now slept side by side. I might add that Christine insisted that it be that way. She wanted her mother and the woman who later mothered her to be close together in their final resting places.

You know, Chichester, when we lose a beloved person, we always endeavor to find solace in our mind and in our heart, grasping at threads sometimes to find it. As for me, I drew what satisfaction I could from the contention that Mrs. Rowland's last years had, without a doubt, been her happiest. With Christine's entrance into our lives, and subsequently Edgar's, she bore some of the fruits of the motherhood that nature had unjustly failed to bestow upon her.

Naturally, after Mrs. Rowland passed away, our house lost some of the atmosphere of home that it had had. Christine was in her senior year in high school and, in her schoolgirl manner, became the self-appointed lady-of-the-house. If at that time we had not all been quite so despondent, this self-imposed responsibility would have had many amusing aspects. She marketed and planned the menus. Edgar and I never criticized her, but the meals she planned and the menus she submitted to the cook—Ifs a wonder that we did not suffer from gastric ulcers.

And the decorators. I always have had a soft place in my heart for them since. The following summer when we had the

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house redecorated she assumed full responsibility for its supervision, and I don't believe there was a bit of the work that did not come under her critical eye or meet her full approval.

Life always has to go on, and we soon coerced ourselves into some semblance of a household, if not a balanced family. Edgar and I continued with our duties, and it did not seem long before he and I sat in the high school auditorium listening to the valedictorian make his speech. Afterward Christine rushed into my arms, violently crushing her diploma in the process.

In September I sent her to college. During the preceding summer she had had several discussions around the table with us regarding her plans for the future. At one time she thought she might like to teach. Later she

selected home economics. Finally she chose art. However, after she had attended school one month she changed her mind again and decide she would be a journalist.

During her absence Edgar and I were drawn closer together. I suppose you might say we were forced upon each other. We played golf, attended ballgames, and did all those things that men usually do to consume idle hours. For the first time in my life I even played a few games of pool and bowled a bit when other forms of entertainment began to pall.

Although we never spoke of it, the house possessed an unwelcome atmosphere for us. This is true of any house that has been accustomed to feminine participation in its daily activities and then is suddenly deprived of it. Those female traits that we find at times to be the most annoying are the ones that we miss the most. There is just something lacking that is very difficult to understand and still more difficult to explain.

However, there was one consolation: Christine's letters. Not once, as I recall, did we fail to get a daily letter, always addressed jointly to Edgar and me. They were interesting letters. A young girl's personal diary may have been more intimate, but it could never had been more copious in details or couched in more picturesque language about each day's experiences.

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During the holiday season I noticed she had gained a little more poise, but all in all she was still a piquant little girl—I thought. The evening of her arrival she sat and recounted all of her experiences with the friends who comprised her new life, and when I retired I had lived with them so much in pure imagination that I almost felt I knew these strangers.

Our home for those two weeks became the scene of constant reunions with her old classmates and friends. One evening I became aware of a distinct change that had occurred.

The brother-and-sister relationship between Edgar and Christine had somehow vanished, to a degree if not entirely. Christine's attitude toward Edgar had not been altered, but the change was obvious in Edgar's demeanor. I had become so accustomed to accepting them as my children that it was difficult to view them in any other light. And then it occurred to me. I was a little provoked with myself, a doctor, in not having diagnosed it before. Christine was no longer a little girl.

By one of those incomprehensible lightning-like transitions common to the opposite sex, she had become a little woman. You know how it is. One

day they are little girls; then overnight, it seems, they have been transformed into the full bloom of womanhood. Somehow boys experience a slower transition into manhood. Perhaps the various stages, such as soprano voices growing into the male categories of tenor, bass, and so forth, and the anticipation experienced while waiting for enough fuzz to grow on the chin to justify the first shave, may have some bearing on this. But at any rate, manhood seems to approach in easy stages, while womanhood arrives with startling suddenness.

After I realized what had occurred during Christine's absence, it was only natural that I should watch Edgar with growing interest. He took her out with him frequently, but, whereas in the past it had always been with almost thoughtless nonchalance, his attitude now approached schoolboy self-consciousness—especially his eyes. They had an appearance of appraisal,

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as though they were only now aware of her—aware for the first time that she did have sex. If Christine in turn were conscious of this change, I could not detect it, and I really don't believe that she was.

The holidays passed all too quickly, and Christine returned to school. Edgar and I resumed the routine we had had to maintain during the first semester, only now it seemed a little more trying. Edgar was morose, a mood that was unusual for him. He took only a desultory interest in the activities that he and I had enjoyed before. Also, the indifferent interest he displayed in her letters made me feel sometimes that he resented the fact that he had to share them with me. Perhaps he felt that they were too impersonal. For the first time I was afraid that our father-and-son relationship might become strained. Needless to say, I was concerned, but I tried to be patient, feeling that something would happen to relieve this trying situation. And eventually it did.

One evening in the early spring as I was preparing to leave my office, I decided that I would call him and ask if he wished to ride out to the house with me. When I reached him on the phone he said that he would but that he wasn't quite ready, and he asked me to drop by his office and meet him there.

When I walked into his office he looked up from his desk and said: "Uncle Dennis, I'll be with you in a minute. I'm just getting ready to close up."

I waited while he arranged some papers that he had been working on. After he had cleared his desk he got his hat, and as we were preparing to go he said: "By the way, Uncle Dennis, you've never seen the layout up here, have you? Come on, I want to show you around, and I'd like to have you meet Mr. Prescott."

He led me through the various offices, telling me in turn whose each was and describing the appointments. At the far end of the suite we came to a closed door with "Paul Prescott, C. P. A." lettered on the frosted glass. Edgar knocked and,

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upon invitation, opened the door and led the way into the office. I was hardly through the doorway before he was making the introduction.

"Mr. Prescott," he said, "I want you to meet my Uncle, Dr. Rowland."

We both acknowledged the introduction, and I told him the usual things—that I was glad to meet him and that I had heard a lot about him, and he replied smiling that he had heard a lot about me, too. You know how stereotyped first meetings always are.

I asked him how Edgar was getting along with his work, and he put an arm around Edgar's shoulders and stated that he felt that he would make an auditor out of him—in fact, a good auditor.

Prescott was a rather striking figure, with dark brown hair which was well groomed. His features were clearly defined, almost sharply. He reminded me of illustrations I had seen in shirt and collar ads. The man was a living fashion plate. In fact I was highly impressed with his handsomeness.

We stood for a long time and spoke in generalities, of business, the weather, and so forth. At length I looked at my watch and suggested that he go out to the house and have dinner with us. He declined at first, very formally, but, on Edgar's continued insistence, he finally consented.

I remember that as we were walking toward the elevators Edgar said: "After all, were all bachelors, and I think that this idea of a bachelor dinner should be right chummy."

As I look back now, I often wish that the man had never been invited to darken our door. Subsequently his entrance into our lives was to cast a shadow upon us that never has been dispelled. Oh, don't misunderstand me. I liked him. In addition to his being strikingly handsome, I found him to be

one of the most engaging men I ever knew and one of the finest. To be honest, that dinner was the beginning of a wonderful friendship.

In the succeeding months we played golf, attended ballgames, and engaged in one activity or another whenever we

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could be together. Edgar invariably joined us, and he recovered his former spirits. I fancied that Prescott's being younger than I and older than Edgar may have been the factor that bridged the gap that, I formerly felt, was drawing Edgar and me apart. Just from observation I assumed that Prescott had not mixed much before and that he, too, welcomed these recreational periods and our companionship.

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Chapter 4

DR. ROWLAND LOOKED UP AT THE SUN. “Chichester,” he said, “I believe that we’d better move into the shade. Even a North Carolina sun can get rather hot when it gets up there a bit.”

“Yes, Doctor,” Chichester agreed. “I was beginning to think the same thing.” They picked up the empty kegs and moved them farther toward the east and sat down again. Dr. Rowland pulled his watch from his pocket before sitting down.

“Say,” he said, “we’re about to miss our lunch.”

“Doctor,” Chichester replied, “if you don’t mind I’d rather you would continue. If the dining room’s closed when we get to the hotel, we can get my car and drive to Waynesville and pick up a bite to eat there.”

Dr. Rowland looked at the other man a moment. “Well, all right, Chichester. I hate to go into so much detail, but as I review these events, some of the details assume a significance that even I have never fully appreciated.”

He sat a moment as though turning back the pages of time like a person who neglects to use a bookmark and tries to find his place once more. At length he spoke again:

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Well, sir, the school semester ended the first of June, and we had Christine back with us again. To surprise her I had invited a group of her friends to the house before her arrival, and they were all there when Edgar drove up and brought her in.

I don’t believe that I have ever enjoyed a reunion quite so much. There was the usual kissing, hugging, and conglomerated chatter so customary when a group of women assemble, especially young women. For some time Edgar and I remained in the background, quite forgotten.

That evening after the guests had gone, Prescott dropped around, as he often did, and Christine met him for the first time. He didn’t remain long—merely stated that he was looking for a bowling partner, and after sitting down for a short chat, he left.

With Christine’s return the pattern of our life at home changed again—particularly for Edgar. Practically all the time he had spent with Prescott

and me was now devoted to her. I'm quite certain that it did not faze Prescott one iota. A real and understanding friendship had grown between him and me. We continued our daily golf games, and when there were night ballgames we attended them.

I had grown very fond of the man. He had a wonderful personality, epitomizing the best manners, together with a sense of humor that often approached brilliance. Our conversations were rarely of a personal nature, and they had no occasion to be. We just enjoyed each other's company to the extreme. Among men that is quite sufficient.

It sometimes occurred to me that it was rather singular that such a charming person should retain his single blessedness so long. Upon one occasion, I recall, I teased him about it.

Thoughtfully he looked down the fairway before he answered. Then he turned and smiled. "You know, Doc," he said, "I presume, by accepted standards of eligibility, I do have a few of those qualities with which you flatter me, but I understand that in the requirements for marriage there is one that is

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rather more important—I believe, Doc, they call it 'love'." We both laughed and walked on.

There never seemed to be a particle of conceit in the man, although he never appeared to lack self-assurance.

About two weeks after Christine had returned I was in my room completing my toilet and preparing to go to town. Earlier I had left her downstairs in the living room buried in some romantic novel. I was just slipping on my coat when the doorbell rang. A moment later I heard Christine's voice calling from below: "Docs, Mr. Prescott's here to see you."

As I came down the stairs I could hear them talking, exchanging amenities. Christine was playing the conventional hostess until I should arrive. When I entered the living room, she took her chair again and picked up the book.

"Doc," Prescott said, "how about a round of golf this afternoon?"

I told him I was sorry but that I was on my way to the office.

"Really, Doc, I hate that," he said. "I probably should have called you. The only way a person seems to be able to get a doctor, even to play golf, is to make an appointment."

We both laughed and Christine looked up from her book and laughed, too. Obviously her reading was a mere pretense.

“How about you, Miss Mulholland?” Prescott asked. “Won’t you join me?”

“Oh, but I can’t play,” Christine replied.

“Oh, but you can learn,” he said. “Everyone you see on the course today had to do that at one time or another.”

“Christine,” I said, “why don’t you go? You’re reading too much. The first thing you know, you’ll have to wear glasses, and I don’t think they’ll be particularly becoming.”

“Won’t you, Miss Mulholland?” Prescott urged.

She sat a moment with her lower lip pushed over her upper, as she always did when she was making a decision. “All right,” she said.

She put down her book and started for the stairs. At the

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first step she turned and said: “I’ll be only a minute, Mr. Prescott. Excuse me, please.”

I stood and watched from the porch as they drove off. I always have disliked seeing young people mope around the house. They should be out doing things, and it doesn’t seem to me that they can be happy unless they are.

This golf lesson developed into a course of lessons, becoming almost a daily event. I was very busy at the time preparing a paper to be presented at a convention in New York, and I went out with them only once or twice. Prescott took quite an interest in her, and I was of the opinion that Christine was just a bit flattered in having a mature man devote so much attention to her. It was reminiscent of the interest Edgar had taken in her when he first came to live with us. But I knew now that Edgar was in love with her.

On one occasion I teased her about these lessons. I suggested that her obvious slowness in grasping the essentials of the game might mean that she was dividing her concentration between the instructor and instructions. She accepted my teasing good-naturedly—too good-naturedly, I realize as I look back.

Ordinarily they returned from the country club soon after Edgar arrived at the house, and upon several occasions they stopped by the office to meet him. Edgar joined them only one afternoon, as I recall, because he was

engaged on a long detailed audit which he was trying to complete at a specified time.

However, in the evenings Edgar was always with her. I don't know where they went or what they did. I just accepted their evenings away from home as an established procedure. I was usually in bed when they returned. Often I heard them enter laughing and talking. As they approached the stairs they became quiet, bade each other a quiet good night at the top step, and went to their rooms.

Late one afternoon, several weeks after the first golf lesson, I was in my study trying to complete the last draft of my manuscript. Although I didn't give it much thought at the time,

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Christine, oddly enough, was at home. From time to time I could hear her playing the electric victrola, and occasionally her voice contributed the lyrics. Then suddenly the music stopped in the middle of a number. From the open window I could hear voices on the porch, and presently I heard her feet tripping up the stairs.

She knocked on my door, but entered without waiting for a reply. "Docs," she said, "Paul—I mean Mr. Prescott wants me to have dinner downtown with him. May I go?"

"Certainly, Christine," I answered. "I don't see any reason why you can't."

"Oh, thanks, Docs," she said. "You're a honey." As she said that she walked over to me and kissed me on the forehead.

"You're going to pick up Edgar, of course," I remarked, as she started to leave the room.

"As far as I know, Docs," she said. "We usually do, you know," She returned to kiss me again and hurried to the door, almost forgetting to say good-bye in her haste.

I stood by the window until they drove away. Subconsciously I noticed how punctilious he was when he assisted her into the car.

I rather welcomed their departure, and I believe I hoped that the house would remain quiet, in order that I might be able to give my work the undivided attention that it required. It grew dark, and I had to turn on the desk lamp.

The house was silent, and I did not hear anyone enter or come up the stairway, so that when there was a knock on my door it rather startled me. It

was Edgar. He came into the room and took a chair near the window.

“How are you this evening, Uncle Dennis?” he said.

“Fine,” I replied. “I couldn’t be any better. And you?”

“First rate,” he said, but his voice belied the conviction the words implied. He sat looking out of the window for a while. Presently, without turning toward me, he asked: “Is Christine in yet?”

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The only light in the room was that of my desk lamp. I could not see his face well in the semidarkness, but I thought I detected a tone of concern in his voice. The glare of a street lamp in front of the house sketched his head in silhouette, except for a few unruly locks of blond hair that glowed like silvery floss.

“No, Edgar,” I answered after a pause, “she isn’t in—yet.”

He didn’t speak, but just kept looking out of the window.

“She went to dinner with Prescott,” I added.

He sat quietly for a few minutes, and when he finally spoke his voice was soft and strained. “Thank you, Uncle Dennis,” he said.

I watched him as he walked to the door, which he slowly opened and closed as he let himself out of the room. A little later I heard him go down the stairs. The front door slammed, and then I was alone in the silent house again.

The next morning I left for New York and spent the greater part of two weeks there. In an intervening weekend I decided to pay a visit to the little town, the home of Agnes’ parents, the Graysons.

The time that I spent there accomplished just exactly what I had expected—nothing. Yes, many people had known the Graysons. They always seemed to be in good financial circumstances, and some remembered the daughter. She had gone abroad immediately after leaving high school for further study and had not returned to this country for several years. When she had returned she had been married and had a daughter, they recalled. Some remembered that her husband had been an Englishman. Her mother had died quite a number of years before her father, and when he had died Agnes had remained in town until she had disposed of the old family home and a business block the Graysons owned downtown. In substance, I already knew this, and I can’t say that when I returned to New York I was disappointed. I had satisfied myself that I had left no stone unturned.

A drizzling rain was falling the night that I arrived at the terminal station in Atlanta. It was about twelve o'clock, and before taking a cab I bought a morning paper.

The house was dark, and I quietly carried my bags to my room and put my hat on a table. I tiptoed down the hallway to Edgar's room, which was between my room and Christine's, whose bedroom, in turn, was in the front of the house adjoining my study. I opened the door to his room, and the light from the hallway fell upon him in bed, sound asleep with an arm curled under his head. I went into my study for a moment and switched on the light. I looked through the mail that had accumulated during my absence; there was nothing of importance, and I turned off the light and stepped into the hallway again. I walked down the hall to the door of Christine's room and slowly turned the knob and pushed the door open. I had intended for some time to have the hinges on that door oiled, and they groaned ominously as I opened the door. The light from the street, shining through rivulets of rain that coursed down the windows, cast creeping shadows on the smooth counterpane of her unoccupied bed. In all the years I studied medicine no skeleton I ever saw looked so soulless or quite so sinister as that empty room. The door groaned again as I slowly pulled it to. I went to my room and prepared for bed—wondering, just wondering.

I cannot recall just exactly what thoughts passed through my mind as I undressed. They were conflicting and had very little continuity. At one time I determined to wake Edgar and inquire about Christine, but on second thought I decided to wait a while. After I got into bed I switched on the bed lamp and started to read the paper. I am afraid, though, that I didn't concentrate at all. My attention drifted between the print on the page and the clock on the dresser.

At one-thirty I heard the front door open. Minutes passed before Christine slowly came up the stairs and passed my door on the way to her room. For the third time that night I heard the infernal hinges on her door groan as she entered her bedroom

and closed the door. As I listened I could hear her moving about, and just as I was about to put down my paper and switch off the light I heard her door open again. I lay there wondering about all this curious activity and waited

for her to pass my room on the way to the bathroom just beyond. But she stopped at my door; it slowly opened, and her head came around the edge.

“Hello, Docs,” she said quietly. “May I come in?”

“Certainly, darling,” I replied, putting my paper aside. She kissed me on the forehead and then sat at the foot of the bed facing me, with one leg folded beneath her.

“Have a nice trip?” she asked.

“Yes, Christine. A very nice trip,” I replied.

“Tired, aren’t you?” she said.

“Not so very much, my dear,” I replied. “And you, Christine,” I asked, “did you have a nice time while I was away?”

She didn’t answer immediately—merely nodded and then after a pause she said: “Yes, Docs. I’ve had a very nice time.”

Something in her deportment held my attention. She had become so mysteriously feminine in the past few months— sometimes she had been rather difficult and then again, for no apparent reason, so unrestrained in those hard-to-understand vagaries of her sex that I had recognized these various weather warnings and had adjusted myself accordingly. Tonight, however, her face was curiously inexpressive. It was impassive and thoughtful in that singular manner people assume when they draft and redraft their thoughts before they speak.

I watched that lower lip pushed up over the upper. I didn’t inquire what was on her mind, but just waited for her to talk.

“Docs,” she said at length, “I’ve something to tell you.” Her voice was low and level, almost a whisper.

“Yes, Christine,” I replied, “what is it?”

She didn’t speak. Her eyes avoided mine and rested on the foot that protruded from under her leg. “Come, Christine,” I urged. “Tell me. What is it?”

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Reluctantly, it seemed, she pulled her eyes away from that foot and turned them steadily into mine. “Docs,” she said, “I’m in love.”

I looked at the pale white face a moment. Her lips were drawn tight now in an almost bloodless line.

“With Paul Prescott?” I asked.

“Yes, Docs, with Paul,” she replied. Those brown eyes never wavered as she spoke, and for the first time I encountered something in them that I had never encountered before. They were challenging me.

“So,” I said in as nearly a matter-of-fact manner as I could muster, “my little girl is in love. And when, may I ask, did all this happen?”

“I don’t know exactly, Docs,” she answered. “Yes, I’m in love, but it’s not just that. I’m going to be married.”

“That’s not so unusual, is it?” I asked, rather lightly. “Most people in love usually wind up at the altar, I believe.”

She didn’t smile, but turned and looked at that foot again. When she did look up, her eyes spoke in defiance before her lips did. “Docs, I’m going to be married in August,” she said. Then, for my additional information, she added: “Next month.” She spoke simply and yet with a tone of finality.

I took my glasses off and wiped them on the bed sheet before I answered her. Just why I did that, I don’t know, because I knew I probably wouldn’t read after what she had said. When I did speak to her, I said just exactly what I did not intend to say. “Christine, you must remember that I’m still your guardian,” I pointed out. “You know that you’re not of age, yet. Don’t you?”

“Yes, I know,” she replied. “That’s why I came to you—first.”

“Christine!” I exclaimed. “You don’t mean——”

“Yes, Docs,” she interrupted, “I do mean that I’m afraid that I would elope if you didn’t give your consent. Oh, I know,” she went on, “I’m just approaching nineteen. I’m quite aware of what you’re thinking—that I’m infatuated with a mature man, considerably older than I am. Paul *is* about eighteen years older

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than I, to be sure, but he is really older in years alone, and every day that I’ve been with him the difference in our ages has seemed less and less to me. Yes, I’ve read and heard them say that even if it doesn’t make so much difference now, twenty years from now hell be a rather old man and I’ll still be a young woman. But I don’t think so, Docs. Paul lives too clean and wholesome a life to age that rapidly.” (Inwardly, I had to grant the truth in this.)

She spoke on and on, giving her arguments calmly and deliberately, and to each one of my objections she had a carefully rehearsed refutation.

As I sat there, propped up in bed, and listened to her, I was impressed with the fact that I was listening to a woman, not to a little girl. I didn't concentrate on all that she said, but my mind instead drifted to the home of her mother in New York State. I saw its conservative aristocracy, a home that reflected the breeding of the people that had lived there and of the daughter that was reared in it. Now I was sitting opposite the daughter and granddaughter of those people, Agnes' little girl, no longer a child, and no longer just a mature young lady, but a woman in love—deeply in love.

There are two times in a woman's life, Chichester, when her eyes show focal digressions from their common emotional expressions of joy, sorrow, and so forth: one when she first falls in love and the other in expectant motherhood. Christine's eyes that night had the indefinable luster of the first.

When she finally finished, I still had not given my consent. She emphasized that everything, regardless of what I thought, had been straightforward—that Prescott would call me for a golf appointment in the morning, and that she preferred that I would not make a decision until after I had spoken to him.

When we finished our discussion and she was ready to go, she came over to the head of the bed, leaned down, and kissed me. "Don't be so concerned, Docs," she said. "After you talk to Paul, I know that you'll see it our way."

"I was just thinking," I said.

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"Yes?" she asked, waiting for me to go on.

"About Edgar," I said.

"Edgar?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied, "Edgar. He's in love with you, too, you know."

She stood stiffly erect, and when I looked up at her, her eyes were riveted on the paneling of the door across the room. Her lips were drawn in a straight line again and her face had grown even whiter than it had been before.

When she finally spoke her eyes never left the door. "Edgar?" she said in a voice that was hardly audible. "No. Not Edgar. I'm sorry, Docs. Terribly sorry. I didn't know. Really, I didn't."

She didn't look at me again until she had reached the door. Then she stood in the doorway and said, "Good night, Docs."

I couldn't see her face, but her figure, draped in negligee, was well defined by the hallway light. It was the figure of the little orphan girl I had come to love so well—now a woman in love, asking me, her only remaining benefactor, to bless that love.

I don't recall now how much longer I sat propped up in bed. If I thought at all while I reclined there, I don't recall what the thoughts might have been. The house seemed extremely quiet with an ominous silence that presaged I knew not what. The only sound was the methodical ticking of the clock on my dresser. In the silence its rhythmic beats seemed amplified ten-fold. My only recollection of dropping off to sleep was awakening. The sun struck me in the eyes, and as I rubbed sleep from them, I found that the bed lamp was still burning.

As I dressed I reviewed our conversation of the previous night. She was so young. Then suddenly I realized that Mrs. Rowland had been only slightly older when we were married. Sitting on the edge of the bed as I put on my shoes, I was aware that I had reached the static age. It is that age when we are shocked to learn how many milestones we have passed. It suddenly dawns on us that young people are not actually hastening into the serious phases of life any more prematurely than we did,

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and the people who seemed old just a few years ago now appear to die before their time. Later as I drove to the office I realized that overnight my life too had suddenly changed. I began to feel very, very old.

Prescott called me that morning, as Christine had said he would, and we made an appointment for that afternoon.

He spoke only in generalities as we drove out to the course. We played three holes of golf, and as we were walking on the fairway toward the fourth green, he finally brought up the subject that had occasioned this game.

"Christine spoke to you, I believe?" he asked, and then added: "About our plans?"

"Yes, she did," I replied. "Last night after I returned from New York."

He gazed down the fairway for a long time. Then he turned and looked squarely at me. "You know, Doc," he said, "this, honestly, has been the most difficult situation I believe that I've ever faced."

"Yes," I commented, "I should imagine that it would be."

When he spoke again his eyes were turned away from me once more toward the flag that marked the hole on the green ahead. "You see, Doc," he said, "about ten days after I started bringing Christine out here, we approached the tee for the fifth hole, just beyond that flag ahead of us. Christine had not been getting her drives off as well as I thought that she could. Her stance was bad and she just wasn't gripping her driver as she should have, despite my constant coaching.

"When we came up to the fifth tee, I decided to help her in a way that you've probably used to help beginners yourself. I stood behind her with my arms around her, set her fingers properly on the club and tried to perfect the position of her feet. I noticed that she wasn't giving her undivided attention to my instructions, and I believe that I was just a bit provoked when I finished and asked her whether or not she understood. She turned her head and looked up at me and said, 'Yes, Paul, I—understand.' She dropped her club, and the next moment she

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was in my arms. Whether or not I had been in love with her before I don't know, but I believe I must have been; it was so spontaneous.

"The past few weeks have been the most tormenting I have ever experienced. I do love her, and conflicting with that love, I realize that in so many respects I have no basis upon which to justify her loving me. I have time and again propounded to her all the reasonable objections to our marriage, but she has been sincerely adamant with counterarguments. As certain as I am that she really does love me, just so much more certain am I that I truly do love her. Other than the disparity in our ages, I see no adequate reason why we should not be happy, and I am now fully assured that that will not be a barrier in our case. A few months ago I should have thought that such a contention held by anyone would have been absolutely idiotic. It seems when certain situations are applied to ourselves, their preposterousness is unequivocally altered. Instead of tempering emotion with common sense we allow emotion to sway our judgment."

We did not speak much more. We finished our game, however, and I believe it was the poorest either one of us ever played. After our shower we had drinks served on the clubhouse veranda. Both of us sat looking out over the course; the sun was setting, and the links were deserted.

At length I spoke. "Prescott," I said, and he turned and looked at me.

"Yes, Doc," he replied.

"I hope that you and Christine will be very happy," I said.

"Thank you, Doc." he said. "I'm sure that we will be." It was said simply and with sincerity.

The following night as I was going down to dinner I met Edgar at the head of the stairs. "Edgar," I said, "I want you to come into my study a moment. I wish to have a talk with you.

"Sit down, son," I said, after I had closed the door. He took the chair by the window, and I sat by my desk facing him. I

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idly toyed with a pen as I considered how I was going to approach the problem I wished to discuss with him. He didn't look at me, but kept his eyes averted, looking out of the window, watching the traffic that passed down the boulevard.

"Son," I said, "what I want to talk to you about may be a bit distasteful."

"Yes, sir," he replied, without turning toward me.

"This may be very difficult for you," I told him. "You know, son, there are times when we have to reconcile ourselves to moments of great disappointment. It so happens that life is made up of them as well as moments of happiness, except that we probably notice them more. Often it is better that it is like that, for without the rain we should never really appreciate the sunshine. Like everyone else, I've had my share—the greatest, of course, was when I lost my wife, your aunt. Those things, Edgar, are always so difficult to accept. They are too incomprehensible for the human mind. But just as nature gives us sunshine to disperse periods in which it immerses the world in despondent weather, so too she gives our lives many light moments to offset our pains. You and Christine became the sunshine in my life after I lost your aunt. You both have brought me untold happiness, and I want to take this opportunity to express my appreciation.

"Now it becomes my painful duty to break some news to you that will not be easy for you to take, and I trust that you will accept it with the grace and common sense with which I know you are endowed. Edgar," I said in a tenor that drew his eyes away from the window momentarily, "Christine is getting married-next month."

His gaze drifted out toward the boulevard again, and just when I thought that he was not going to reply and that I should have to reopen the conversation he turned and looked at me in an attitude that approached conviction. "Yes, Uncle Dennis, I have been of the opinion for some time

that that would happen,” he said. “It came sooner than I expected, but has not surprised

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me. All that I can say, right now, is that——Well, I haven’t changed my mind about him. I still think he’s a great person and I still admire him—very much.”

I pondered over his last statement a moment. “It takes great courage, son,” I said, “to make a statement like that. We all like to win and we all can’t, and I’m glad you feel that way, Edgar. You took it the way I hoped that you would and in a manner I was certain that you would.”

We sat in silence for some time. It was one of those situations when everything to be said has been said. Further conversation would have been strained and superfluous. At length he got up and stretched. “Well, Uncle Dennis,” he said, “I guess I’ll run along and get ready for dinner.”

As he reached the door I stopped him. “Edgar,” I said, “there is just one more thing I haven’t mentioned.”

“Yes, sir,” he replied, turning and facing me with a hand resting on the doorknob.

“I am of the opinion that Prescott is going to ask you to serve as best man,” I said. “In fact, he has suggested it.”

For the first time a spark of fire kindled in his eyes before he spoke. “Isn’t that rather adding insult to injury?” he said with bitterness.

I studied him for a moment. “If Prescott knew how you feel about Christine, I would say ‘yes’,” I replied, “but don’t forget he views you in the light of Christine’s brother rather than as another suitor.”

He considered this a moment, and just as he was leaving the room he said: “Let me think it over, Uncle Dennis.”

Dinner that night was tense. We were all pretending—pretending that nothing had changed. Our topics of conversation were irrelevant and foreign to our thoughts, and our laughter was pitifully synthetic. Furthermore, we continued to live in this strained atmosphere until the wedding day.

The wedding was a small, quiet affair held at our home. Only a group of very close friends was present. One of Christine’s classmates attended her, and Edgar was the best man.

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There was no elaborate reception afterward; we merely had a simple buffet luncheon, and the only departure from this simplicity was the traditional wedding cake.

Christine was a radiant bride, but during the entire ceremony my eyes were continuously drawn from her to the two men that stood at her side. Prescott, for once, did not seem to possess the self-assurance he usually commanded. He wasn't nervous, but his face was pale and his jaw was set as though it were locked. His well-groomed hair gleamed like the glossy finish of a beautiful piano, and, in his white linen suit he looked like a naval officer standing at attention.

Edgar's face was also pale. His unruly blond hair seemed to be on temporary good behavior for the occasion. As I sat and watched, his fists unconsciously clenched and unclenched with each word of the nuptial ceremony. I knew exactly how he felt and how he must have suffered.

When the preacher reached that point in the wedding vows—I don't know it verbatim, but it's where he says in substance: 'And if anyone can give reason why this man and woman should not be joined in holy wedlock, let him speak now or forever after keep his peace'—perhaps it was all in my imagination, but I thought that I saw Prescott wince slightly, and Christine's radiance appeared to fade for a fleeting moment. I believe that I was mistaken, and that it was only during subsequent events that I fancied I had noticed what I thought I had. If I had only known then what I do know now, how much grief could have been spared! The happiness we had all been enjoying would have continued, and probably—I've often wondered.

After the wedding cake had been cut and during the ensuing confusion I walked over to Christine and asked her to come to my study after she had changed her clothes.

For a long time, it seemed, I sat in my study alone. I wanted to be alone. I thought of Agnes and Mrs. Rowland and how much they would have enjoyed witnessing this momentous event in which I had to participate alone. After a while I arose and paced up and down the floor, pausing now and then to look

absently out of the window. I didn't hear Christine enter. My first intimation that she was there was when I heard someone behind me softly say, "Docs."

I turned, and she flung herself into my arms and embraced me tighter than, I believe, I have ever been embraced before. I patted her shoulders, and I am certain that tears crowded her eyes. "Is my little girl happy?" I asked.

"Oh, Docs!" she replied. "Kiss me, Docs. Kiss me hard, real hard, real hard, and tell me that you're happy, too."

I kissed her, and then, as she cradled her head on my chest, I slowly stroked her hair. "Well, darling, I said, "my little girl deserves all the happiness in the world, and I know that she is going to find it." I began to feel that my emotions were getting out of hand, so in a rather remonstrative tone, I said: "But, Christine, we must go. After all, the groom waits below, and from now on *he* is the all-important man."

I walked down the stairs with her, my arm around her waist, and we joined the others. After a short time they bade everyone good-bye and went to their car through the traditional hail of rice.

As they drove off she turned, smiled, and waved to me. "Good-bye, Docs," she called. "I'll be seeing you soon."

How little did she realize just how soon that was to be, and how little did I realize then that I was never to see that smile again in all its radiance!

They came up here for their honeymoon. To the hotel over yonder, and

Chapter 5

DR. ROWLAND STOPPED SPEAKING AS ONE of the carpenters approached and stood beside him.

“Yes, George, what is it?” he asked.

“Excuse me, Doc, but I wonder if you’ll come up and take a look at that cabinet I’m building in the kitchen.”

Dr. Rowland stretched and sighed. “All right, I’ll be along in a moment.”

Dr. Rowland turned to Chichester. “Excuse me, Chichester, will you? I don’t think I’ll be more than a moment.”

As soon as Dr. Rowland went Chichester took out a cigarette and lit it. He studied with interest the hotel on the other side of the valley. There was nothing in its appearance that would suggest anything except tranquillity, a harbor for rest, peace, and quiet. He looked over and below to his right beyond the creek. An automobile was emerging from the grove of trees and entering the horseshoe curve. He turned so that he could watch it progress over the wooden bridge and come abreast below the bluff. It labored on and up the continuing grade in a straightaway to the left and disappeared over a crest among the trees.

Dr. Rowland returned and, after looking at his watch, took

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his seat. He was silent for a few moments before resuming his narrative, and Chichester didn’t break the silence. Dr. Rowland drew thoughtfully on his pipe.

Well, Chichester, as I look upon it, it was only natural that they would pick these hills for their honeymoon. Christine had been coming up here for approximately seven years, and she truly loved the valley. And who wouldn’t? The hills seem, in their beauty, to be made for love and the forgetfulness of the more austere preoccupations of our lives.

It was unusually lonesome in our house that evening after supper. Edgar went to his room, and I sat in the living room engaged in what proved to be a futile diversion—trying to read a book. The hours dragged. Finally, in disgust, I gave it up. I went to the bookcase and was replacing the book in

its proper place on the shelf when the telephone rang. It was a long-distance call for me from Sylva, North Carolina.

A strange woman's voice spoke: "Dr. Rowland?" she asked.

"Yes. This is Dr. Rowland," I replied.

"This is the hospital in Sylva, North Carolina," she said. "There's been a serious automobile accident. Mrs. Prescott is here in the hospital and wants you to come up here at once."

"What!" I exclaimed. "Please say that again!"

She repeated what she had just said, adding: "Mr. Prescott has been seriously injured. Can you come at once?"

"And Mrs. Prescott?" I asked. "How is she?"

"Mrs. Prescott, she advised, "is suffering only from shock, but she asked me to tell you to please hurry. Will you?"

"Yes. Yes, of course," I replied. "Tell her I'll be up there just as soon as I can get there."

I stood paralyzed after I had cradled the telephone. And then the urgent note in that woman's voice spurred me to action. Christine needed me. She was pleading with me to hurry. I rushed upstairs and called Edgar. Fortunately he had not retired, and we were soon on our way.

That trip is one of which I recall but very little in detail.

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We must literally have raced up there, and although the speedometer needle never seemed to fall below sixty, it appeared to me that the car moved at a snail's pace. As you know, almost that entire drive is through hills, and I often wonder now how we escaped the hospital ourselves.

Edgar had no sooner stopped in front of the hospital than I was out of the car and had raced up the steps. They conducted me to an anteroom where I found Christine lying on a lounge. There was a nurse with her, and when I entered I motioned that she leave the room. I don't believe words will ever be able to describe the emotions, the depths of despair that Christine must have been experiencing. At best I can only imagine—a happy bride, being married to the man she loved and becoming the widow of that man all within the space of a few hours. The whole thing was just too fantastic for human comprehension. You see, Paul Prescott had died before we arrived. He had never regained consciousness after having been received at the hospital.

I sat beside Christine and ran my hand affectionately over her shoulders—shoulders that shook with the convulsions of her constant sobs. Finally she sat up and buried her head on my shoulder.

“Docs, it isn’t true,” she sobbed. “Tell me, Docs. Tell me. They’re wrong, aren’t they? Paul isn’t dead. He isn’t. Please, Docs, tell me it isn’t so. It can’t be so.”

“Now, now, Christine,” I said. I stroked her back, and Edgar came in and sat on the other side of her. We both sat silent, and the only sound in the room was her incessant crying. There was really nothing to be said. We were all too stunned.

It did not seem possible that that great fellow, Paul Prescott, handsome in white suit, virile as a midshipman, should now be lying—dead. Sudden death is terrible in that its finality is thrust upon those still alive with the sudden premature ending of a serial story in which the last installment is missing. We all feel that it shouldn’t have ended that way. But for us who live, it has.

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As Christine settled down a bit, I left her in Edgar’s care and went to the receiving desk to learn more details of the accident. This was to be a night of continual surprising and puzzling incidents.

The nurse at the receiving desk informed me that Prescott had been alone at the time of the accident. Christine had not arrived at the hospital until two hours afterwards—two hours after her husband had died. I was astonished. The woman who had called me had stated that he had been seriously injured, but then, I may have misunderstood her; she may have said “fatally.” However, the nurse at the desk assured me that that was the way it had happened. Furthermore, she informed me that the car had been found headed *toward* Atlanta!

I couldn’t understand all this, and it appeared that I would have to wait until Christine regained her composure before I could learn further details.

I don’t believe that I spent more than ten or fifteen minutes at the desk, but when I returned to the reception room Christine and Edgar were gone. A nurse entered the room at that moment and asked me if I were Dr. Rowland.

“Yes,” I replied. “I’m looking for Mrs. Prescott and my nephew.”

“I know,” she said. “Mrs. Prescott has become suddenly worse, and I had to move her. You’ll find her in Room Seventeen. I’ll show you the

way.”

“Worse? How?” I asked, as we walked down the corridor.

“Just shock and hysteria, you know,” she replied. “They come in surges. I believe after you’ve seen her she should be given a sedative.”

When we entered the room Christine was lying face down on the bed. Edgar was bending over her trying to console her, but rather futilely.

I heard Christine moaning: “The metronome again. The metronome. Why does it always have to be a metronome?”

I stood in the room amazed as she kept repeating these phrases. I looked at Edgar, and he looked back at me and just

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shook his head in bewilderment. I motioned to him, and we stepped out into the corridor.

“Edgar, what is this?” I asked. “What does she mean—‘the metronome’? She keeps repeating it, Edgar. What does she mean?”

“Uncle Dennis,” he replied, “I don’t know. I really don’t. The band leader who found Prescott right after the accident came into the reception room to see Christine. She was sobbing on my shoulder, the way she was when you left, and I began to think that she would settle down.”

“Yes, yes,” I said. “Go on.”

“Well, this fellow,” Edgar said, speaking more rapidly, “told me his orchestra was on the way here to play for a dance, when Mr. Prescott’s car passed them going at terrific speed. Inasmuch as it was raining, he said that he thought at the time that the driver was taking an *awful* chance. About a mile or two farther on, he and his band saw a guard rail broken down, and they stopped and got out, figuring it might be a wreck. And sure enough, there was the car in the railroad cut below. They all went down and found Mr. Prescott unconscious over the broken steering wheel.”

“Yes, yes, son,” I said impatiently. “Go on. I know all about that.”

“I am, Uncle Dennis,” he apologized. “As fast as I can. Well, he said that by some miracle the motor was still running when they got down to the car and that the windshield wiper was moving slowly back and forth. He said that it reminded him of a pendulum or like the metronome he used sometimes when the band was rehearsing. He said that it kept ticking away until the motor finally stopped, and with a gasp it stopped, too. “And then Christine screamed: ‘Oh, my God! The metronome! Dear God, will it always have to be a metronome?’ And, Uncle Dennis, that’s all I know.”

I didn't speak when he finished, and he asked: "Did I do anything wrong, Uncle Dennis?"

"What?" I asked, rather startled. "Oh, no. No, son, you

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didn't do anything wrong. I imagine that we had better go back to Christine."

Christine was no better when we re-entered the room, and I called the nurse aside. "Take care of her," I instructed. "She is going to need some rest."

I left Edgar at the hospital and drove down to the undertaking parlor. There I made arrangements to have the body transported to Atlanta, and they gave me Prescott's personal effects—his wallet, key case, watch, and so forth. From there I went to the garage and looked at the car. It had little salvage value. It had been one of those freak accidents. The steering wheel was broken, but the windshield was not. I made the necessary arrangements with the garage people to keep the car until I could report to the insurance company.

It was then about three o'clock in the morning. I returned to the hospital and found that Christine had been put to sleep. In the reception room I found Edgar, also sound asleep. I had wanted to have him drive me up to the hotel, but when I found him peacefully asleep I decided that I would drive up alone.

My primary purpose was to get Christine's and Prescott's personal effects, but I also wanted to find out how it had occurred that Prescott had been driving by himself, and toward Atlanta of all places.

When I arrived at the hotel I paid their bill and then asked the clerk if he had been on duty at the time all this had happened, and he told me that he had been.

"Dr. Rowland," he said, "they came in just before the dining room closed and had to hurry, I recall, in order that they might be served. Later, I remember, they sat on the porch for a while, and when it started to rain they came in. Soon after that Mrs. Prescott got her key and went upstairs, and he came over and got some picture postcards of the hotel and sat at the desk over there, writing.

"About thirty minutes later Mr. Prescott went up. But he wasn't gone long. In about ten minutes he came back down, and he seemed to be a little upset and asked me: 'It's too late to

send a telegram from here, isn't it?' I told him that it was— that after the station master left you would have to either phone Sylva or Canton. Then he told me if he didn't return for a while, and if Mrs. Prescott inquired for him, to tell her not to worry, and then he left."

"Well," I asked him, "did Mrs. Prescott ask for him?"

"Yes, sir," the clerk replied. "It wasn't very long after that that she came down, and I gave her his message. She walked out on the veranda, and I could see her pacing up and down. Then about two hours later, Grover Webb, who owns a filling station halfway to Sylva, came in and asked me if we had a Mr. Prescott registered. I told him yes, and he said that he had been in an accident. So I told him that that was his wife out on the porch. Grover went out there, and I saw them talking a minute. Then they left, and I soon heard Grover's truck bumping down the driveway."

He paused a moment as he finished and then asked: "Was Mr. Prescott hurt bad, Doctor?"

"Yes," I answered. "He's dead."

With that I got the key to their room and went up. I began to feel like a detective making a private investigation. But this was only the beginning.

I opened the door to their room, turned on the light, and walked around. Christine's nightgown was carefully laid out as though it were ready to be put on, but the negligee was carelessly dropped across the bed as people will do when they disrobe. I walked into the bathroom. One bath towel had been used; the others still lay folded on the rack. Prescott's baggage had not been unpacked, not even opened, but Christine's had. Her frocks and gowns were hung in the closet, and I found her other clothes neatly arranged in the dresser drawers. Placed on top of the dressing table were all of her toilet articles and accessories.

I had never packed women's clothes before, and I'm afraid that I did a very poor job. Her bags wouldn't hold all of the stuff that had come out of them, and as I started to go, I had

to carry a half dozen frocks over my arm. At the door, I glanced around to see if I'd missed anything, and of course I had—the most obvious of all, her toilet articles. So I reopened one bag and, surprisingly, found room for

them and also for a miniature portrait of Prescott and one of her mother that had been set on each side of the dressing table.

The valley was getting gray in the light of dawn when I drove from the hotel. On the way to Sylva I stopped at the filling station owned by this man Webb. But all that he could add was that the picture postcards had been found in Prescott's coat, and they naturally assumed that he had been a guest at the hotel, and that was how he had located Christine.

"They hadn't been married long, had they?" he asked as I prepared to go.

"No," I replied. "Just since yesterday afternoon." I drove off before I could hear his reply.

He did, however, give me the postcards, and I read them later. All the messages were of the type that a man would write if he were just killing time. Some that were probably written to business associates were formally signed "Paul Prescott," others just "Paul."

Later that afternoon we all returned to Atlanta. Edgar completed the funeral arrangements, while I remained at home with Christine.

Occasionally I made it a point to pass by her room. At times I saw her sitting by the window staring off into space and at other times stretched across the bed, softly sobbing. I felt that it would be better for her to be alone for a while, not wishing to aggravate her grief with futile consolation.

That night just before I was to retire, I stopped at her door and said, "Good night, Christine."

"Oh, Docs," she said, "do come in. Won't you, please?"

"Certainly, Christine," I replied. I walked in and picked up the bench at her dressing table, placed it beside the bed, and sat facing her.

She propped herself up on the pillow at the head of the bed

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and then said: "Docs, I wish you would turn out the ceiling light and turn on one of the boudoir lamps. That ceiling light is just too bright." I did as she requested and sat down again.

"How do you feel, darling?" I asked.

She merely shook her head. She sat silently staring straight ahead. Her composure, I noticed, had reached one of those moratoriums common in great grief. She had cried until she had exhausted herself. Dark shadows under her eyes betrayed a sleepless night, and her face had a chalky pallor that worried me.

“Docs,” she said at length. “I want to tell you about last night.”

“Now, darling, I said, ”let’s not live all that over again. Please.”

She turned and looked at me as though she were debating the advisability of accepting my advice, her lips set in that typical fashion of contemplation. “No, Docs,” she said, “I do want to talk to you about it. I don’t understand—I just don’t understand why Paul didn’t come back to the room when he found that he had to send a telegram from Sylva. That—well—it just doesn’t seem at all like him.”

“No,” I admitted, “I agree with you, Christine. It doesn’t.”

“I could have gone along with him just as well as not,” she added. “It wouldn’t have taken me a minute to dress.”

It did seem odd, now that she mentioned it. I wondered why it hadn’t occurred to me. But then, it must be remembered, Sylva was only twenty miles away. Still, on the first night of a honeymoon, extraordinary consideration and attention would have been in order, rather than one act of negligence, however slight. And Paul Prescott was not the type of man that you would associate with any act of rudeness or inattention.

“Perhaps, Christine,” I said, after I had weighed this unexplained circumstance, “you *had* better tell me—tell me just what did happen last night. Everything.”

She raised her left hand before she spoke, studying the wedding ring. Then she slowly drew it off and placed it on the

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small table beside her bed. “Well, Docs,” she said, “we didn’t get to the hotel until just before the dining room closed. You remember how late it was when we left here. We had just time enough to freshen up a bit and go down. Then after we had eaten we sat out on the porch a while, but it started to rain and it got rather chilly, so we came into the lobby, where we sat a little longer.

“It must have been about eight-thirty when I went up to the room. I undressed, had my bath, and was sitting at the dressing table in my negligee, fixing my hair, when Paul knocked on the door.

“I called, ‘Come in,’ and just to be cute I didn’t turn because I could watch him in the mirror of the dressing table. Just teasing, you know. I sat smiling as I watched him approach in the mirror. He bent down and kissed me on the back of my neck. It tickled and I threw my head back. And then, he kissed me really, you know.”

I nodded. Yes, I knew. Under other circumstances I probably might have smiled.

“Well,” she continued, “in just a little bit, I reached over and picked up Mummie’s picture, and I said: ‘Paul, you’ve never seen a picture of my mother, have you?’”

“And he said, ‘No, darling, I haven’t.’”

“I handed the picture to him; you know it’s the one that I like so much and always carry with me. He looked at it a long time and then he looked down at me and said: ‘She was beautiful, wasn’t she, Christine? It isn’t any wonder that you’re so beautiful, too, and that I love you so much.’”

“With that. Docs, he picked me up, took me in his arms and kissed me. I thought that he would never let me go. Oh, Docs, how I loved him!”

I was afraid that she was going to cry again, but in a moment she regained control of herself.

“And then, Docs,” she continued, “he walked over to his bags and I thought that he was going to unpack. He picked up

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one bag and then put it down again and stood for a moment, thinking. ‘Christine,’ he said.

“‘Yes, Paul,’ I replied.

“‘Christine,’ he repeated, ‘I really should send a wire. Would you mind?’ he asked me.

“And Docs, I said, ‘No. Why, of course not.’”

“When he got to the door he turned and said: ‘I won’t be gone any longer than I have to, darling? He stood there smiling just a little bit, and, Docs, his eyes were filled with adoration. He loved me so much, I know. And, oh, Docs!—he was my life. My whole life. And that was the last time I ever saw him alive.’”

She didn’t speak for a few minutes, and then she went on. “Docs,” she said, “I believe that you know the rest—about Mr. Webb taking me to Sylva. I don’t believe I ever thought a truck could move quite so slowly. But it didn’t matter. Paul had died when I got to Sylva.

“But, Docs, I still can’t understand—I can’t understand why—why he didn’t take me with him.”

“Christine,” I said, “I don’t know. I really don’t. Perhaps he figured that he would be back in a little over an hour and didn’t want to trouble you.”

We discussed some other phases of the accident, and not long afterward I left her and went to bed.

Prescott had some relatives in the Midwest—an uncle and some cousins. In reply to our wires they said they couldn't attend the funeral.

Three days after the accident we buried Paul Prescott next to Agnes on the side opposite Mrs. Rowland's grave. Two of the people who had entered Christine's life and heart after the death of her mother now lay on either side of the woman who had given her life.

The day of the funeral was dreary. A steady drizzle contributed its note of melancholy to the spiritless rites. Edgar sat with Christine under the canvas canopy, and during the ceremony I could not take my eyes from their pale, strained faces.

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Sometimes, even in times of dire stress, we think of some of the most infinitesimal irrelevancies. I recall thinking how Christine's life so far seemed to have a parallel only in some Shakespearean tragedy. It didn't appear to be just I thought that God had been very unfair to my little girl, but later I was to learn that in His own inimitable fashion, even in tragedy, He had been fair and that He was just.

Edgar had to leave town a few hours after we returned to the house, and after escorting Christine to her room I went into my study to do nothing but just sit and think. I don't believe that I thought much; collectedly, that is. I, as well as the rest, was still too stunned by Prescott's sudden death.

Shortly before dinner I heard Christine leave her room and quietly walk down the stairs. I looked at my watch and decided to go downstairs too.

I walked slowly and silently down the stairs of that grief-stricken house, meditating on the events of the past few days. At the landing of the staircase something—what it really was I don't know—made me hesitate. But when I reached that point I paused and looked down on the hall below. Christine was down there, walking slowly back and forth.

There was nothing so unusual in that alone, but something about her behavior commanded my attention. You see, we had one of those tall old-fashioned grandfather's clocks in the hall, and every time she passed it she would turn her head and look at the face. It was an action akin to the mounting impatience of a person provoked by waiting for an appointment long past due. As she walked she kept twisting and untwisting a

handkerchief around her thumb. She paced up and down a few more times, and then she suddenly stopped and turned, facing the clock.

Chichester, I saw an expression on her face and in her eyes that I had never seen in all the years I knew her and trust that I shall never have to see again. I shall *never* forget it. It was an expression of hatred. Absolute loathing!

She stood like that for a moment and then stepped over to

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the clock, stooped, and opened the glass door to the case that housed the large pendulum. The ticking of the great timepiece that I had never noticed in the past suddenly manifested itself in the sudden silence that followed after she stopped the movement of the pendulum.

I waited until she stood up again and had walked away. When I felt certain that she had not observed me, I descended into the hallway.

The following evening I was in my office downtown and was just preparing to go home, when I opened a drawer to my desk, one that I use infrequently. There were Prescott's personal effects that I had brought from Sylva. I decided I'd take them home, and then on second thought I decided that I might go to his office and see what other personal items might be there and take them at the same time. Mr. Woolsey, the senior partner, was very generous about my request, and after chatting for a little while I went into his former partner's office. Nothing had been touched since his death, I was informed.

Upon going through his desk I didn't find anything of interest—miscellaneous and unimportant receipts and other things of that nature. There were several framed diplomas and certificates on the wall and two pictures of convention gatherings. I looked at each one of the pictures until I had identified him among the group—you know how you will do that—and then I took them down and placed them on the desk. In a steel filing cabinet I found a small steel box, the type that people often use for the safekeeping of personal papers. One of the keys in his key case fitted the lock. Opening the box, I found only some odd papers, bank statements, and canceled checks. On the bottom, though, there was another steel box about the size of a cashier's coin box. When I unlocked it I noticed that it contained a sheaf of personal letters. I locked both boxes again and, together with the diplomas, certificates, and pictures, took them with me.

Upon arriving at the house I took all these things up to my study and placed them on my desk.

Christine was unable to come down to dinner and had a tray

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sent up to her room. After I had finished eating I went up and spent an hour or more with her. I had almost forgotten the steel file-box until I returned to my study and saw it on the desk.

I unlocked the larger box and took the smaller steel box out and opened it. As I said, it seemed to be filled with nothing but personal letters, and as I carelessly ran my fingers through them I noticed that, with one exception, they were all addressed in the same handwriting—characteristically feminine. Ordinarily, I don't believe I would ever have read those letters. After all, even a dead man's intimate life should be respected. But on the bottom of that steel box there was a package, and when I saw it a sudden explosion in the house could not have stunned me more.

Chichester, I shall never forget that night. I opened the package, read the letters—read them and reread them—arranged them in chronological order, and then read them again. I paced the floor of my study, astounded, unbelieving, and then read those letters again to prove that what had been revealed to me was true—absolutely true. I didn't want to believe that they were true, but there they were—a documentary history that could not be disputed. I heard the milkman leave the milk on the steps of the porch, and it was finally daylight before I gathered up the letters and the package, locked them up in the box again, and put them in a cabinet in my room which, to my knowledge, I locked for the first time since I'd owned it.

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Chapter 6

DR. ROWLAND PAUSED AND PICKED UP the cane which he had left lying on the ground. For a moment he toyed with it, drawing circles on the ground beyond his feet.

"You see, Chichester," he said, looking down at the tip of his cane, "Paul Prescott was Christine's father."

"You *mean*——" Chichester exclaimed.

"Yes. He had married his own daughter."

Neither man spoke. Chichester looked across the valley at the hotel, never changing in its setting among the trees. Dr. Rowland kept his eyes on the tip of his cane as he spoke again:

I know, Chichester, it does not seem plausible. In all of its preposterous coincidence, it was just too bizarre for even me to believe despite the written evidence. We read in the newspapers quite frequently of relatives who are happily reunited, often after years and years in which neither knew that the other existed. But fate played a wicked trump—the ace of spades—when Christine and her father were reunited.

As I said, it was because of finding the package that I read the correspondence so thoroughly. The contents of the letters

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formed a gigantic jigsaw puzzle. Some of the pieces were missing, and I had to use my imagination to form the missing links, but as a whole the picture they presented was fairly complete.

The package was addressed to Miss Agnes Grayson in some other woman's care in England. It had evidently been returned to Prescott under separate cover, because I learned from a letter later that his mail had been intercepted and returned by Mrs. Grayson, Agnes' mother. When I opened this package I found a jeweler's gift box and in it a golden locket and chain. The locket was heart-shaped with a diamond set in the center, and underneath it I found a card that read: "To my darling daughter." I stood there a long time with that locket in my hand as I began to realize the truth.

It was obviously not intended for a child, for it was a full-sized locket. Later I was to wonder about that.

From the letters I learned that Paul Prescott and Agnes Grayson had been high-school sweethearts. Living in the same town, as they did, they wrote few letters during this youthful courtship. As I recall, there were only two letters from her to him, both written when he was in the Midwest visiting his uncle. From these two letters it became evident that he lived with his grandmother, for no mention of his parents was ever made—only two short references in which she stated that she had seen his grandmother. That would indicate that he had been an orphan, or perhaps his family may have become estranged and he made his home with her. Both letters were couched in simple schoolgirl language and both were very ardent in a similar tenor.

In their senior year in high school the first tragedy in these two lives took place. Paul Prescott and Agnes Grayson allowed their love to go beyond the bounds of discretion. Agnes learned that she was in trouble, and her family must have learned of it soon after. Or she may have told them when she realized the predicament in which she found herself. There was only one letter from which I gleaned this information, and in substance it read like this:

“Dear Paul,” it said, “I know, dear, that we haven’t been discreet.

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But they just won’t understand that in a love like ours there can be no discretion. I have talked and talked, but they just won’t listen to me at all. Why can’t they be forgiving? Since when is it such a crime to be in love and love each other beyond what people dictate is wrong and right?

“Darling, I have no regrets in loving you, even to that extent. I only regret that it has forced them into barring you from being with me or even seeing me. It isn’t fair and it isn’t just that they should treat us like this. I never thought that I should turn against my family in any way, but my love for you is so great that I cannot let them impose upon me.

“Now Mother says that she is going to take me to England. Next week, she says. Passage has been arranged. What are we going to do, Paul? I am at my wits’ end. I just pray and pray to God that they don’t take me away. Please, Paul, if there is any way in which you can help me stay, please do. I have asked them to let me marry you, but they will hear none of it. They have told me quite brutally that they do not want you in the family and that I am to have my baby abroad. The family name, the family reputation, the family name—I have heard that over and over again until I am frantic.

“Darling, I hear Mother at the front door. I shall give this to Nora to mail, and please when you answer, see that she gets the letter.”

The letter was signed, “With all my love, Agnes.”

Nora, who was mentioned in the letter, I imagined was a servant.

The next letters came from England. They were of no particular interest to me except as they filled in the story of her life after she left this country. However, the last letter from her was written apparently from her bed after the baby was born, and I remember it well:

“Darling Paul,” she wrote, “I am so, so happy. You and I are the parents of a beautiful baby daughter. Isn’t that just grand? And Paul, I believe she is going to look a lot like you, with dark brown hair and dark eyes. I hope so, darling. I want

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her to, so much, so that even if they won’t let me have you personally, at least I shall be able to look at her and see you and live my love for you in her. She is a beautiful child. I looked her over carefully when they brought her to me, and there is only one blemish, and I know you won’t mind that. She has a cute little strawberry birthmark on her left knee.”

When I read that, I recalled Christine’s birthmark, only it wasn’t small; it had grown as she did.

The letter went on to say: “Paul dear, we haven’t named her yet. I wanted to call her Paula or Pauline, for you, but Mother will have none of that. Right now, the gramophone, that’s what they call a victrola here, is playing beautiful Christmas music and I have been thinking that if I can’t call her Paula, I’ll give her a name to fit the occasion, something Christmasy. I’ve thought of calling her Carol after Christmas carols, you know, or Noëlla. How do you like those names?”

I don’t recall the rest of the letter, but it wasn’t important. Agnes obviously must have carried out her Christmas motive when she named the child Christine.

I remember walking over to the window after I read that letter, to stand and look out into the night. So much was clear now that hadn’t been before. I revisualized that hotel room—the filmy negligee, filmy to the point of transparency. Even if she had not carelessly exposed that birthmark on her knee, which was entirely possible, it couldn’t well have been hidden from the sight of someone who was aware of its existence. I often thought that that negligee defeated the purpose for which a negligee is really intended.

However, in a woman's mind it probably served its purpose in the way that women intend it should. I really wouldn't know. After all, I'm only a doctor.

But to get back to the story. Of course there was the picture of Agnes on the dressing table. There could be no doubt that he recognized that. Even if I had not found a picture of Agnes among those letters, I would not have doubted that he would immediately recognize her. The picture I found must have been taken in front of their high school, and even the thirteen years

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or more that intervened had not destroyed those delicate features one iota, except, of course, for the natural changes that come with maturity.

I've often wondered since about the mental travail the poor fellow must have experienced that night after he realized that the daughter, whom I have no doubt he would have cherished in the natural conduct of life, had been suddenly discovered under such extenuating circumstances. I have never even tried to hazard a guess as to what must have gone on in his mind. Chichester, he was too great a fellow to be visited by such a catastrophe, and Christine, even in her sorrow, must never know. I determined then that she must never know. The delusion she has now is that she is the legitimate child of Agnes and Mulholland, and her only grief at present is the loss of her husband. If she were to learn the truth it would only add to her grief, and I wish to spare her that.

The day after I had read the letters I debated whether or not I should destroy them. I finally decided against their destruction. Sometime, I was afraid, their evidential value might be required, painful as it might be. We never know. I therefore took the letters, the photograph, and the wrapper from the package and put them in a large envelope, which I carefully sealed and placed in my safety deposit box in the bank. (I intend to put a clause in my will regarding the custody of the letters after my death.) I was going to put the locket with the letters, but upon second thought I put it in the drawer of my desk. In itself, you see, it did not reveal a thing. The following Christmas I included it with the other gifts I gave her. It was rather mushy sentiment, I'll admit. Yet, somehow, I felt it was fully justifiable.

Dr. Rowland paused a moment, and Chichester asked: "One thing I don't understand, Doctor. Didn't Prescott ever make an attempt to

communicate with Agnes after she had the baby or try to go to her? Surely there must have been some way.”

“Yes, Chichester, I thought the same thing as I read those

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letters. And Prescott, I am afraid, almost destroyed that link. There was one letter, written from London about a year after Christine was born. It was torn in two, as though he had intended to destroy it and then had changed his mind.”

“The letter was from her mother. Under the circumstances, as I know them now, it was, I believe, one of the cruelest letters I have ever read. From its contents I gathered that Agnes must have been living in a veritable prison—a family prison. His letters to Agnes, and, in greater part, her letters to him had been intercepted, I learned. This accounted for the locket’s having been returned to him. He was warned against further efforts to establish contact with Agnes; any such efforts would only be futile. Then she aimed the thrust that undoubtedly killed any hope he may have had. She told him that Agnes was going to be married the following week. This letter was written when Christine must have been about one year old.

“That brings me to Mulholland. He was the one person in this fantastic denouement in the lives of these people whom I cannot fully understand. Not that it is particularly important now, but nevertheless I have wondered about him quite a bit too. In the first place, it is unusual for a man to marry an unwed mother, unless he happens to be the guilty sire. Sometimes I was prone to believe that he may have been influenced by a dower from Mrs. Grayson. However, Christine’s description of him would refute that. She said he was prosperous and that he was always very kind and considerate. I’ve seen his picture upon numerous occasions, and I shall have to admit that it does reflect character. From what Christine told me he must have been Agnes’ senior by quite a number of years.

“Christine could not recall England as a child, although she knew that she had been born there. So I presume that Mulholland and Agnes must have brought her to the States before she had reached the age of recognition. It would not have surprised me to know that Agnes was the one that had been instrumental in that move. Subsequent events would bear that out. For, although she had been a true and good wife, she apparently

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never forgot her first and perhaps her only real love—her love for Paul Prescott.”

Dr. Rowland yawned and stretched expansively, and Chichester took the opportunity to ask: “But, Doctor, of all the places in this country, wasn’t it quite a coincidence that Agnes should come to live in Atlanta, where Prescott lived?”

“That, Chichester,” Dr. Rowland replied, “was one of the very few things that were not coincidences.”

“After I had read the letters and unfolded the astounding past of these two people, I again went through the other papers that I had found in the larger steel box. There was nothing of particular interest until I examined his canceled checks. Among these were checks that appeared each month—no doubt in payment of rent, for they were all made out to Gaylord Apartments, Incorporated. The first and last dates more than included the period during which Agnes lived in Atlanta, and the Gaylord Apartments, Chichester, are just three blocks from where Agnes lived at that time.

“In some respect, I believe, Agnes Mulholland became a sort of female counterpart of Enoch Arden. Somehow she must have traced him and found that he lived in Atlanta. She may have done this through the medium of city directories in the public library or in some other manner. That wouldn’t have been difficult.

“But why, throughout her residence in Atlanta, she didn’t approach him or acquaint him with her presence, I really don’t know. It surprises me that, living so close together, they didn’t even meet accidentally. Atlanta isn’t that all-fired large, you know.

“On the other hand I have little doubt that she saw him from time to time, unobtrusively of course. But the paradox of the human emotions, especially the female version of them, is often hard to understand. Sometimes, I believe, her dilemma was a conflict between her unrequited love for him and the possible fear of breaking Christine’s illusion regarding her paternity; or perhaps she feared that the stigma of Christine’s illegitimate

birth might be brought to light; or perhaps—Well, there are so many reasons that could be surmised that it would be difficult to select one that would be conclusive and still right. Maybe she didn’t know herself. The human mind, even in more rational situations, is often unpredictable.”

Chichester watched Dr. Rowland as he paused to fill his pipe. When he had finished, Chichester asked: "Then ifs your opinion, Doctor, that Prescott committed suicide?"

"Chichester, I don't know." Dr. Rowland spoke slowly. "I just don't know. I would, of course, like to believe that he didn't—that it was an accident. Knowing how level-headed he was, I would say 'no.' But, on the stark realization of what had happened, he may have become temporarily insane. No one will ever know that. Sometimes, when I think about it, it seems to me that it was too obviously an accident to have been really an accident; it was too much of a coincidence. If he had been in his right mind at the time, surely some solution other than suicide would have presented itself. However, to us who are still alive it was an accident, and that's the way that it will always have to remain."

"And Christine?" Chichester asked. "What finally happened to her?"

Dr. Rowland sat for a few moments with his elbows on his knees and with his face cupped in his hands. Then he straightened up and looked across the valley toward the red roof of the hotel. "Poor little Christine," he said, shaking his head. "I finally sent her to live with friends of mine in California. Her plans at present are to spend a portion of each summer here with me. She still loves this valley, despite the grief she has experienced here. That's another reason why I am building this house and rushing these men along. Shell be here next week. She refuses to stay at the hotel. Last summer I rented a cottage on the bluff to our right. The porch overlooks the valley and the hotel. It appeared that she enjoyed it in a manner. However, often when I stepped out on the porch I found her sitting with a book turned down in her lap, toying

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with the golden heart that hung from her neck—not aware that it really was her own—and looking dreamily across the valley toward the hotel, where her happiness was to begin but where, instead, it ended.

"She will never know, and I shall never be able to tell her, that that unrequited love that swells her heart with sorrow was in reality a love quite different from what she thought. It was the love of a father and daughter for each other, felt by each, but mistaken for a love so mysteriously different."

Dr. Rowland glanced up toward the sun and then looked at his watch. "Well, Chichester, shall we go?" he inquired, rising and stretching.

"Yes, I think we'd better," Chichester replied.

Only once during their walk back to the hotel did Dr. Rowland interrupt a conversation which he purposely confined to other subjects.

“Chichester,” he said, as they paused halfway up the long tier of concrete stairs which led to the hotel, “I want to be sure that you meet Christine while she is here.”

“I shall be pleased to,” Chichester replied. “I really shall.” And the following week he did.

The mantel clock struck ten. The fire in the fireplace had melted to glowing coals. Chichester looked up as the clock laboriously tolled the last hour. From his side he picked up the newspaper and reread the brief item on the society page.

“Marriage—Solemnized—on—West—Coast.” He repeated the headlines aloud slowly word by word. “Of interest to Atlanta society was the announcement of the recent marriage of Christine Mulholland Prescott to Mr. Edgar Emory Tyndall. Mrs. Tyndall was the ...” Chichester folded the paper thoughtfully and stuffed it between the cushion and the upholstered arm of his chair. She really was beautiful, particularly those large eyes that Dr. Rowland had loved so much. They were beautiful in a brooding sort of way, the only way that Chichester had ever known them.

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He sat quietly looking into the coals. Here and there capricious little flames flickered up playfully in vain attempts to arouse the spiritless embers. When the clock tolled the quarter hour he got up, walked to the door, and switched on the ceiling lights. For a moment he squinted as he tried to adjust his eyes to the sudden brilliance that flooded the room. Then he went from window to window and carefully drew the curtains. Going across the room, he stopped before a small painting. He took it from its hook, placed it on the floor, and from a concealed wall safe extracted a gusset envelope.

When he was seated again he slowly drew a cigarette from his pocket, lit it, and slowly untied the cord which was wrapped around the envelope. Painstakingly he withdrew the contents: a folded sheet of paper, some mellowed letters, and a faded photograph. The letters and photograph he placed on the table beside him. He unfolded the sheet of paper and in the almost illegible script made by a hand that had long been accustomed to writing bewildering prescriptions, he read:

DEAR FRIEND CHICHESTER:

Unless, of course, you should pass from this world before me, this will be my last message to you. It is only an expression in writing of my desires which I have made known to you orally many times since we met. Enclosed with this note are the letters and the photographs of Agnes. These I entrust to you for safe-keeping, for, as I often said, there still is so much to be accounted for and eventually may be. Who can tell?

Therefore, I feel that a further injustice might be incurred if, by the destruction of these documents, Christine were to be deprived of some heritage, at present unknown, but which may exist. Against any such contingency, I ask that you preserve them.

On the other hand, when, and I say this optimistically, she marries, it is my request that they all be destroyed, for I can conceive no heritage greater than

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complete happiness, a heritage which she so justly deserves and which, at this writing, has so cruelly passed her by.

I request this of you, Chichester, knowing full well my desires will be executed as I should want them to be.

It is so difficult to write when I know this letter will not be read until I am gone. I do not wish to be morbid, so in closing let me assure you that I have always regretted our friendship came so late. However, it was a welcome demitasse to complete a well-rounded life.

Your devoted friend,

DENNIS ROWLAND

P.S. Don't forget what I have told you about that blood pressure. D. R.

Chichester smiled as he read the postscript. He laid the note down and read the letters—letters that he could almost quote word for word. Finally he studied the faded photograph, picked up the newspaper, and carefully compared the features of Agnes with those of her daughter.

At length, almost reluctantly, he arose. For several moments he looked down into the glowing coals. Then one by one he let the letters and the photograph drop from his fingers to the hearth. For a while they smoldered

in mute resistance, then yielded to tongues of flame that closed about them and were soon lost beyond redemption.

