

and his voice had a dry sound in his throat. "It's a cowardly thing to disgrace your family and disappoint your friends."

"Now, Burton, see here," Oliver spoke firmly, and his eyes turned shrewd and calculating. He registered a determination to leave town before next week, but it would spoil his plans materially if this young fool made any damaging admissions before he had gone. "You don't want to do anything of the kind. Just leave this to me. Your nerves are jangled, and you are taking a morbid view of a few debts such as any gentleman may run into once in a while. You are bound to come out if you don't lose your nerve."

Oliver fingered the card in his pocket, and threw in a gratuitous lie in part payment of his grudge against Lethington, and to keep Burton away from that fellow's influence until he could get away.

"You just leave this to your friends, your real friends. To tell the truth, it isn't like you to show the white feather, and I am afraid there must be some foundation for what I've been hearing."

"What do you mean?" the boy asked restfully.

"Oh, just a nasty bit of gossip. Some of the boys were laughing over it, and saying that somebody was making conspicuous attempts to influence you—somebody who might, perhaps, have a selfish interest in seeing that the Burton money wasn't spent too lavishly."

A growing amazement and anger swept over the boy's face, but Oliver went on smoothly, poisoning another shaft. With all his shrewdness, he had not learned that this was the point beyond which he might not go, that however reckless this boy might be himself, the affairs of his sister or her friends were not to be bandied about lightly.

"I have not spoken about it before, because I thought you'd soon shake the fellow yourself, but the fact is it is common talk that Lethington is playing grandmother to the Burton estate to recoup the family fortunes by marrying his pallid little sister off to you, and then—"

"You lie!"

A dozen people in the next room sprang up as the boy's voice rang out, high and excited, but the curtain between hid these two from view. Burton was blazing with wrath, smarting, stung with the shame of it. That Nina's name should be dragged in, and in such a way, his sister's too, by implication! Hot, shamed memories of that young romance and its wretched ending seemed to crowd up and mock him, and sharp recollections of Nina's own attitude toward him since his defection, calm, proud, unreachably aloof, branded the whole story as a hideous lie, yet its inference frenzied him, unhinged as he was by torturing anxiety and the fever of drink in his brain. He paused speechless for a moment, half choked by the torrent of refutation struggling to be released. In that moment Oliver shrugged his shoulders and smiled, his first false move in many weeks. Something snapped in the boy's center of control; he came at the smiling face like a young cyclone.

"Take it back!" he commanded, furiously, his tense fingers closing like a vise around Oliver's throat.

He was the younger and stronger of the two, and for the moment that the frenzy of his wrath was on him he shook the other back and forth with that angry grip. Oliver fought with one hand, struggling, swaying; the other sought his pocket and came out with a revolver just as Burton flung him heavily aside.

There was a hateful treachery and determination in Oliver's eyes as he swung his arm up for its aim, one of those black rages which now and then swept over him regardless of life or law or human consequences, and as Burton saw it he sprang to wrest the weapon from him, knowing in that instant that his life hung only on the swiftness of his arm. He barely made it, and they closed and struggled silently over the little shining weapon.

There was a commotion in the next room, footsteps running through. Someone threw the curtain aside, a fam-

iliar voice cried his name, and he found time to wonder how Lethington had come there, and remembered the broken engagement, swept from his mind by his harassing financial troubles. On the heels of this a new commotion, a hoarse warning. "Run, we're raided!" and in the next instant the lights were out, and he was struggling in the darkness with a furious man whose only mind now was to wrench himself away and flee.

Out of the blackness, with its scurrying footsteps and the new uproar outside, there came a single shot, the thud of a falling body. In the same instant the doors crashed in; someone turned on the lights. Disordered rooms were there, overturned chairs and tables, coins and cards and glasses strewn the floor, and a group of baffled young men who had been caught before they could escape. Boyd Oliver was one of them, red with anger yet, trying still to be jaunty, but not succeeding very well as a little, unostentatious man in gray tapped him on the shoulder and reminded him of that old charge against him, and the men around him almost forgot their own predicament in staring wonderingly at him.

Beyond these, in the bed-room, Tom Lethington lay out on the floor, a widening stream of red staining the white of his shirt front, and over him stood Ted Burton, a smoking revolver still held in his hand as he looked with dazed and uncomprehending eyes at the figure on the floor. He searched for the pulse, and found none, placed half shrinking fingers on the creeping stain over the heart, and felt no answering beat. He straightened up again, looking down with fascinated eyes.

The officers of the law were taking quick possession. It had all happened in a few flying seconds, and now one of them flung aside the curtain, took it in with swift eyes and made a leap to disarm the man standing there. In that instant Ted Burton seemed to come out of the trance that possessed him, to realize that he was a murderer, to be seized by the law. He jerked his eyes away from the still figure of the man who had been so true and tried a friend to him, and the revolver went up at the officer coming toward him. It was scarcely a second's respite, but in that time there was a desperate, reckless leap through the open window, the thud of a body on the roof below, and a scramble for the next leap, then shots, as men on watch chased a fear-stricken fugitive, flying footsteps that died in the distance, and after that only silence and the night outside.

Tom Lethington lived. He opened his eyes weakly on a new world, a room of immaculate neatness and simplicity, with a pervading odor of antiseptics and a uniformed nurse bending above him. He looked at her vaguely and closed his eyes again. He was so tired. He could not even think how he had come there.

Then he went into a fever, chatted deliriously of Nina, of Ted, of Boyd Oliver, of old friends and old pleasures, and through it all the reiterated assertion that he must hurry, and get Ted away before the police came. He had vague notions of a man who came and did things to him with the assistance of the nurse, and he caught disjointed phrases, such as "debilitated condition," "overwork," "nervous strain." He seemed to dream that Leila Burton came in, kneeling beside the bed and caressing his hot hands with little articulate murmurs of love and grief, although he was quite sure that he was many miles away from home, chasing Boyd Oliver and Ted over an endless road. There were many other strange visions, too, but little by little the fever left him, weak and tired, to lie there and collect his bewildered thoughts.

Meanwhile there was a more than nine days' scandal. Ted Burton a fugitive from justice, almost a murderer, the sons of a dozen fine old families in disgrace, and Boyd Oliver, who had come so jauntily in their midst, on trial for running a gambling house, and another indictment awaiting him in New Orleans, for impersonating a wealthy man and incidentally forging checks with his name.

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