ДЖИН УЭБСТЕР

THE FOUR-POOLS MYSTERY

Jean Webster

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCING TERRY PATTEN

It was through the Patterson-Pratt forgery case that I first made the acquaintance of Terry Patten, and at the time I should have been more than willing to forego the pleasure.

Our firm rarely dealt with criminal cases, but the Patterson family were long standing clients, and they naturally turned to us when the trouble came. Ordinarily, so important a matter would have been put in the hands of one of the older men, but it happened that I was the one who had drawn up the will for Patterson Senior the night before his suicide, therefore the brunt of the work devolved upon me. The most unpleasant part of the whole affair was the notoriety. Could we have kept it from the papers, it would not have been so bad, but that was a physical impossibility; Terry Patten was on our track, and within a week he had brought down upon us every newspaper in New York.

The first I ever heard of Terry, a card was sent in bearing the inscription, "Mr. Terence K. Patten," and in the lower left-hand corner, "of the Post-Dispatch." I shuddered as I read it. The Post-Dispatch was at that time the yellowest of the yellow journals. While I was still shuddering, Terry walked in through the door the office boy had inadvertently left open.

He nodded a friendly good morning, helped himself to a chair, tossed his hat and gloves upon the table, crossed his legs comfortably, and looked me over. I returned the scrutiny with interest while I was mentally framing a polite formula for getting rid of him without giving rise to any ill feeling. I had no desire to annoy unnecessarily any of the Post-Dispatch's young men.

At first sight my caller did not strike me as unlike a dozen other reporters. His face was the face one feels he has a right to expect of a newspaper man—keen, alert, humorous; on the look-out for opportunities. But with a second glance I commenced to feel interested. I wondered where he had come from and what he had done in the past. His features were undeniably Irish; but that which chiefly awakened my curiosity, was his expression. It was not only wide-awake and intelligent; it was something more. "Knowing" one would say. It carried with it the mark of experience, the indelible stamp of the street. He was a man who has had no childhood, whose education commenced from the cradle.

I did not arrive at all of these conclusions at once, however, for he had finished his inspection before I had fairly started mine. Apparently he found me satisfactory. The smile which had been lurking about the corners of his mouth broadened to a grin, and I commenced wondering uncomfortably what there was funny about my appearance. Then suddenly he leaned forward and began talking in a quick, eager way, that required all my attention to keep abreast of him. After a short preamble in which he set forth his view of the Patterson-Pratt case—and a clearsighted view it was—he commenced asking questions. They were such amazingly impudent questions that they nearly took my breath away. But he asked them in a manner so engagingly innocent that I found myself answering them before I was aware of it. There was a confiding air of *bonne camaraderie* about the fellow which completely put one off one's guard.

At the end of fifteen minutes he was on the inside track of most of my affairs, and was giving me advice through a kindly desire to keep me from getting things in a mess. The situation would have struck me as ludicrous had I stopped to think of it; but it is a fact I have noted since, that, with Terry, one does not appreciate situations until it is too late.

When he had got from me as much information as I possessed, he shook hands cordially, said he was happy to have made my acquaintance, and would try to drop in again some day. After he had gone, and I had had time to review our conversation, I began to grow hot over the matter. I grew hotter still when I read his report in the paper the next morning. I could not understand why I had not kicked him out at first sight, and I sincerely hoped that he would drop in again, that I might avail myself of the opportunity.

He did drop in, and I received him with the utmost cordiality. There was something entirely disarming about Terry's impudence. And so it went. He continued to comment upon the case in the most sensational manner possible, and I railed against him and forgave him with unvarying regularity. In the end we came to be quite friendly over the affair. I found him diverting at a time when I was in need of diversion, though just what attraction he found in me, I have never been able to fathom. It was certainly not that he saw a future source of "stories," for he frankly regarded corporation law as a pursuit devoid of interest. Criminal law was the one branch of the profession for which he felt any respect.

We frequently had lunch together; or breakfast, in his case. His day commenced about noon and lasted till three in the morning. "Well, Terry, what's the news at the morgue today?" I would inquire as we settled ourselves at the table. And Terry would rattle off the details of the latest murder mystery with a cheerfully matter-of-fact air that would have been disgusting had it not been so funny.

It was at this time that I learned his history prior to the days of the Post-Dispatch. He was entirely frank about himself, and if one half of his stories were true, he has achieved some amazing adventures. I strongly suspected at times that the reporting instinct got ahead of the facts, and that he embroidered incidents as he went along.

His father, Terry Senior, had been an Irish politician of considerable ability and some prominence on the East River side of the city. The boy's early education had been picked up in the streets (his father had got the truant officer his position) and it was thorough. Later he had received a more theoretical training in the University of New York, but I think it was his early education which stuck by him longest, and which, in the end, was probably the more useful of the two. Armed with this equipment, it was inevitable that he should develop into a star reporter. Not only did he write his news in an entertaining form, but he first made the news he wrote about. When any sensational crime had been committed which puzzled the police, Terry had an annoying way of solving the mystery himself, and publishing the full particulars in the Post-Dispatch with the glory blatantly attributed to "our reporter." The paper was fully aware that Terence K. Patten was an acquisition to its staff. It had sent him on various commissions to various entertaining quarters of the globe, and in the course of his duty he had encountered experiences. One is forced to admit that he was not always fastidious as to the rôle he played. He had cruised about the Mediterranean as assistant cook on a millionaire's yacht, and had listened to secrets between meals. He had wandered about the country with a monkey and a hand-organ in search of a peddler he suspected of a crime. He had helped along a revolution in South America, and had gone up in a captive war balloon which had broken loose and floated off.

But all this is of no concern at present. I am merely going to chronicle his achievement in one instance—in what he himself has always referred to as the "Four-Pools Mystery." It has already been written up in reporter style as the details came to light from day to day. But a ten-year-old newspaper story is as dead as if it were written on parchment, and since the part Terry played was rather remarkable, and many of the details were at the time suppressed, I think it deserves a more permanent form.

It was through the Patterson-Pratt business by a roundabout way that I got mixed up in the Four-Pools affair. I had been working very hard over the forgery case; I spent every day on it for nine weeks—and nearly every night. I got into the way of lying awake, puzzling over the details, when I should have been sleeping, and that is the sort of work which finishes a man. By the middle of April, when the strain was over, I was as near being a nervous wreck as an ordinarily healthy chap can get.

At this stage my doctor stepped in and ordered a rest in some quiet place out of reach of the New York papers; he suggested a fishing expedition to Cape Cod. I apathetically fell in with the idea, and invited Terry to join me. But he jeered at the notion of finding either pleasure or profit in any such trip. It was too far from the center of crime to contain any interest for Terry.

"Heavens, man! I'd as lief spend a vacation in the middle of the Sahara Desert."

"Oh, the fishing would keep things going," I said.

"Fishing! We'd die of ennui before we had a bite. I'd be murdering you at the end of the first week just for some excitement. If you need a rest—and you are rather seedy—forget all about this Patterson business and plunge into something new. The best rest in the world is a counter-irritant."

This was Terry all over; he himself was utterly devoid of nerves, and he could not appreciate the part they played in a man of normal make-up. My being threatened with nervous prostration he regarded as a joke. His pleasantries rather damped my interest in deep-sea fishing, however, and I cast about for something else. It was at this juncture that I thought of Four-Pools Plantation. "Four-Pools" was the somewhat fantastic name of a stock farm in the Shenandoah Valley, belonging to a great-uncle whom I had not seen since I was a boy.

A few months before, I had had occasion to settle a little legal matter for Colonel Gaylord (he was a colonel by courtesy; so far as I could discover he had never had his hands on a gun except for rabbit shooting) and in the exchange of amenities which followed, he had given me a standing invitation to make the plantation my home whenever I should have occasion to come South. As I had no prospect of leaving New York, I thought nothing of it at the time; but now I determined to take the old gentleman at his word, and spend my enforced vacation in getting acquainted with my Virginia relatives.

This plan struck Terry as just one degree funnier than the fishing expedition. The doctor, however, received the idea with enthusiasm. A farm, he said, with plenty of outdoor life and no excitement, was just the thing I needed. But could he have foreseen the events which were to happen there, I doubt if he would have recommended the place for a nervous man.

CHAPTER II
I ARRIVE AT FOUR-POOLS PLANTATION

As I rolled southward in the train—"jerked" would be a fitter word; the roadbeds of western Virginia are anything but level—I strove to recall my old time impressions of Four-Pools Plantation. It was one of the big plantations in that part of the state, and had always been noted for its hospitality. My vague recollection of the place was a kaleidoscopic vision of music and dancing and laughter, set in the moonlit background of the Shenandoah Valley. I knew, however, that in the eighteen years since my boyhood visit everything had changed.

News had come of my aunt's death, and of Nan's runaway marriage against her father's wishes, and of how she too had died without ever returning home. Poor unhappy Nannie! I was but a boy of twelve when I had seen her last, but she had impressed even my unimpressionable age with a sense of her charm. I had heard that Jeff, the elder of the two boys, had gone completely to the bad, and having broken with his father, had drifted off to no one knew where. This to me was the saddest news of all; Jeff had been the object of my first case of hero worship.

I knew that Colonel Gaylord, now an old man, was living alone with Radnor, who I understood had grown into a fine young fellow, all that his brother had promised. My only remembrance of the Colonel was of a tall dark man who wore riding boots and carried a heavy trainer's whip, and of whom I was very much afraid. My only remembrance of Rad was of a pretty little chap of four, eternally in mischief. It was with a mingled feeling of eagerness and regret that I looked forward to the visit—eagerness to see again the scenes which were so pleasantly associated with my boyhood, and regret that I must renew my memories under such sadly changed conditions.

As I stepped from the train, a tall broad-shouldered young man of twenty-three or thereabouts, came forward to meet me. I should have recognized him for Radnor anywhere, so striking was his resemblance to the brother I had known. He wore a loose flannel shirt and a broad-brimmed felt hat cocked on one side, and he looked so exactly the typical Southern man of the stage that I almost laughed as I greeted him. His welcome was frank and cordial and I liked him from the first. He asked after my health with an amused twinkle in his eyes. Nervous prostration evidently struck him as humorously as it did Terry. Lest I resent his apparent lack of sympathy however, he added, with a hearty whack on my shoulder, that I had come to the right place to get cured.

A drive over sweet smelling country roads behind blooded horses was a new experience to me, fresh from city streets and the rumble of elevated trains. I leaned back with a sigh of content, feeling already as if I had got my boyhood back again.

Radnor enlivened the three miles with stories of the houses we passed and the people who lived in them, and to my law-abiding Northern ears, the recital indubitably smacked of the South. This old gentleman—so Rad called him—had kept an illicit still in his cellar for fifteen years, and it had not been discovered until after his death (of delirium tremens). The young lady who lived in that house—one of the belles of the county—had eloped with the best man on the night before the wedding and the rightful groom had shot himself. The one who lived here had eloped with her father's overseer, and had rowed across the river in the only available boat, leaving her outraged parent on the opposite bank.

I finally burst out laughing.

"Does everyone in the South run away to get married? Don't you ever have any legitimate weddings with cake and rice and old shoes?" As I spoke I remembered Nannie and wondered if I had touched on a delicate subject.

But Radnor returned my laugh.

"We do have a good many elopements," he acknowledged. "Maybe there are more cruel parents in the South." Then he suddenly sobered. "I suppose you remember Nan?" he inquired with an air of hesitation.

"A little," I assented.

"Poor girl!" he said. "I'm afraid she had a pretty tough time. You'd best not mention her to the old gentleman—or Jeff either."

"Does the Colonel still feel hard toward them?"

Radnor frowned slightly.

"He doesn't forgive," he returned.

"What was the trouble with Jeff?" I ventured. "I have never heard any particulars."

"He and my father didn't agree. I don't remember very much about it myself; I was only thirteen when it happened. But I know there was the devil of a row."

"Do you know where he is?" I asked.

Radnor shook his head.

"I sent him some money once or twice, but my father found it out and shut down on my bank account. I've lost track of him lately—he isn't in need of money though. The last I heard he was running a gambling place in Seattle."

"It's a great pity!" I sighed. "He was a fine chap when I knew him."

Radnor echoed my sigh but he did not choose to follow up the subject, and we passed the rest of the way in silence until we turned into the lane that led to Four-Pools. After the manner of many Southern places the house was situated well toward the middle of the large plantation, and entirely out of sight from the road. The private lane which led to it was bordered by a hawthorn hedge, and wound for half a mile or so between pastures and flowering peach orchards. I delightedly breathed in the fresh spring odors, wondering meanwhile how it was that I had let that happy Virginia summer of my boyhood slip so entirely from my mind.

As we rounded a clump of willow trees we came in sight of the house, set on a little rise of ground and approached by a rolling sweep of lawn. It was a good example of colonial—white with green blinds, the broad brick floored veranda, which extended the length of the front, supported by lofty Doric columns. On the south side a huge curved portico bulged out to meet the driveway. Stretching away behind the house was a sleepy box-bordered garden, and behind this, screened by a row of evergreens, were clustered the barns and out-buildings. Some little distance to the left, in a slight hollow and half hidden by an overgrowth of laurels, stood a row of one-story weather-beaten buildings—the old negro cabins, left over from the slave days.

"It's just as I remember it!" I exclaimed delightedly as I noted one familiar object after another. "Nothing has changed."

"Nothing does change in the South," said Radnor, "except the people, and I suppose they change everywhere."

"And those are the deserted negro cabins?" I added, my eye resting on the cluster of gray roofs showing above the shrubbery.

"Just at present they are not so deserted as we should like," he returned with a suggestive undertone in his voice. "You visit the plantation at an interesting time. The Gaylord ha'nt has reappeared."

"The Gaylord ha'nt!" I exclaimed in astonishment. "What on earth is that?"

Radnor laughed.

"One of our godless ancestors once beat a slave to death and his ghost comes back, off and on, to haunt the negro cabins. We hadn't heard anything of him for a good many years and had almost forgotten the story, when last week he reappeared. Devil fires have been seen dancing in the laurels at night, and mysterious moanings have been heard around the cabins. If you have ever had anything to do with negroes, you can know the state our servants are in."

"Well!" said I, "that promises entertainment. I shall look forward to meeting the ha'nt."

We had reached the house by this time, and as we drew up before the portico the Colonel stood on the top step waiting to welcome me. He was looking much as I remembered him except that his hair had turned from black to white, and his former imperious bearing had become a trifle querulous. I jumped out and grasped his outstretched hand.

"I'm glad to see you, my boy! I'm glad to see you," he said cordially.

My heart warmed toward the old man's "my boy." It had been a good many years since anyone had called me that.

"You've grown since I saw you last," he chuckled, as he led the way into the house through the group of negro servants who had gathered to see me arrive.

My first fleeting glimpse through the open doors told me that it was indeed true, as Radnor had said, nothing had changed. The furniture was the same old-fashioned, solidly simple furniture that the house had contained since it was built. I was amused to see the Colonel's gloves and whip thrown carelessly on a chair in the hall. The whip was the one token by which I remembered him.

"So you've been working too hard, have you, Arnold?" the old man inquired, looking me over with twinkling eyes. "We'll give you something to do that will make you forget you've ever seen work before! There are half a dozen colts in the pasture just spoiling to be broken in; you may try your hand at that, sir. And now I reckon supper's about ready," he added. "Nancy doesn't allow any loitering when it's a question of beat biscuits. Take him up to his room, Rad—and you Mose," he called to one of the negroes hanging about the portico, "come and carry up Marse Arnold's things."

At this one of them shambled forward and began picking up my traps which had been dumped in a pile on the steps. His appearance struck me with such an instant feeling of repugnance, that even after I was used to the fellow, I never quite overcame that first involuntary shudder. He was not a full-blooded negro but an octoroon. His color was a muddy yellow, his features were sharp instead of flat, and his hair hung across his forehead almost straight. But these facts alone did not account for his queerness; the most uncanny thing about him was the color of his eyes. They had a yellow glint and narrowed in the light. The creature was bare-footed and wore a faded suit of linsey-woolsey; I wondered at that, for the other servants who had crowded out to see me, were dressed in very decent livery.

Radnor noticed my surprise, and remarked as he led the way up the winding staircase, "Mose isn't much of a beauty, for a fact."

I made no reply as the man was close behind, and the feeling that his eyes were boring into the middle of my back was far from pleasant. But after he had deposited his load on the floor of my room, and, with a sidewise glance which seemed to take in everything without looking directly at anything, had shambled off again, I turned to Rad.

"What's the matter with him?" I demanded.

Radnor threw back his head and laughed.

"You look as if you'd seen the ha'nt! There's nothing to be afraid of. He doesn't bite. The poor fellow's half witted—at least in some respects; in others he's doubly witted."

"Who is he?" I persisted. "Where did he come from?"

"Oh, he's lived here all his life—raised on the place. We're as fond of Mose as if he were a member of the family. He's my father's body servant and he follows him around like a dog. We don't keep him dressed for the part because shoes and stockings make him unhappy."

"But his eyes," I said. "What the deuce is the matter with his eyes?"

Radnor shrugged his shoulders.

"Born that way. His eyes *are* a little queer, but if you've ever noticed it, niggers' eyes are often yellow. The people on the place call him 'Cat-Eye Mose.' You needn't be afraid of him," he added with another laugh, "he's harmless."

CHAPTER III
I MAKE THE ACQUAINTANCE OF THE HA'NT

We had a sensation at supper that night, and I commenced to realize that I was a good many miles from New York. In response to the invitation of Solomon, the old negro butler, we seated ourselves at the table and commenced on the cold dishes before us, while he withdrew to bring in the hot things from the kitchen. As is often the case in Southern plantation houses the kitchen was under a separate roof from the main house, and connected with it by a long open gallery. We waited some time but no supper arrived. The Colonel, becoming impatient, was on the point of going to look for it, when the door burst open and Solomon appeared empty-handed, every hair on his woolly head pointing a different direction.

"De ha'nt, Marse Cunnel, de ha'nt! He's sperrited off de chicken. Right outen de oven from under Nancy's eyes."

"Solomon," said the Colonel severely, "what are you trying to say? Talk sense."

"Sho's yuh bohn, Marse Cunnel; it's de libbin' truf I's tellin' yuh. Dat ha'nt has fotched dat chicken right outen de oven, an' it's vanished in de air."

"You go out and bring that chicken in and don't let me hear another word."

"I cayn't, Marse Cunnel, 'deed I cayn't. Dere ain't no chicken dere."

"Very well, then! Go and get us some ham and eggs and stop this fuss."

Solomon withdrew and we three looked at each other.

"Rad, what's the meaning of this?" the Colonel demanded querulously.

"Some foolishness on the part of the niggers. I'll look into it after supper. When the ha'nt begins abstracting chickens from the oven I think it's time to investigate."

Being naturally curious over the matter, I commenced asking questions about the history and prior appearances of the ha'nt. Radnor answered readily enough, but I noticed that the Colonel appeared restless under the inquiry, and the amused suspicion crossed my mind that he did not entirely discredit the story. When a man has been born and brought up among negroes he comes, in spite of himself, to be tinged with their ideas.

Supper finished, the three of us turned down the gallery toward the kitchen. As we approached the door we heard a murmur of voices, one rising every now and then in a shrill wail which furnished a sort of chorus. Radnor whispered in my ear that he reckoned Nancy had "got um" again. Though I did not comprehend at the moment, I subsequently learned that "um" referred to a sort of emotional ecstasy into which Nancy occasionally worked herself, the motive power being indifferently ghosts or religion.

The kitchen was a large square room, with brick floor, rough shack walls and smoky rafters overhead from which pended strings of garlic, red peppers and herbs. The light was supplied ostensibly by two tallow dips, but in reality by the glowing wood embers of the great open stove bricked into one side of the wall.

Five or six excited negroes were grouped in a circle about a woman with a yellow turban on her head, who was rocking back and forth and shouting at intervals:

"Oh-h, dere's sperrits in de air! I can smell um. I can smell um."

"Nancy!" called the Colonel sharply as we stepped into the room.

Nancy paused a moment and turned upon us a pair of frenzied eyes with nothing much but the whites showing.

"Marse Cunnel, dere's sperrits in de air," she cried. "Sabe yuhself while dere's time. We's all a-treadin' de road to destruction."

"You'll be treading the road to destruction in mighty short order if you don't keep still," he returned grimly. "Now stop this foolishness and tell me what's gone with that chicken."

After a great deal of questioning and patching together, we finally got her story, but I cannot say that it threw much light upon the matter. She had put the chicken in the oven, and then she felt powerful queer, as if something were going to happen. Suddenly she felt a cold wind blow through the room, the candles went out, and she could hear the rustle of "ghostly gahments" sweeping past her. The oven door sprang open of its own accord; she looked inside, and "dere wa'n't no chicken dere!"

Repeated questioning only brought out the same statement but with more circumstantial details. The other negroes backed her up, and the story grew rapidly in magnitude and horror. Nancy's seizures, it appeared, were contagious, and the others by this time were almost as excited as she. The only approximately calm one among them was Cat-Eye Mose who sat in the doorway watching the scene with half furtive eyes and something resembling a grin on his face.

The Colonel, observing that it was a good deal of commotion for the sake of one small chicken, disgustedly dropped the inquiry. As we stepped out into the gallery again, I glanced back at the dancing firelight, the weird cross shadows, and the circle of dusky faces, with, I confess, a somewhat creepy feeling. I could see that in such an atmosphere, it would not take long for superstition to lay its hold on a man.

"What's the meaning of it?" I asked as we strolled slowly toward the house.

"The meaning of it," Radnor shrugged, "is that some of them are lying. The ha'nt, I could swear, has a good flesh and blood appetite. Nancy has been frightened and she believes her own story. There's never any use in trying to sift a negro's lies; they have so much imagination that after five minutes they believe themselves."

"I think I could spot the ghost," I returned. "And that's your precious Cat-Eye Mose."

Radnor shook his head.

"Mose doesn't need to steal chickens. He gets all he wants."

"Mose," the Colonel added emphatically, "is the one person on the place who is absolutely to be trusted."

We had almost reached the house, when we were suddenly startled by a series of shrieks and screams coming toward us across the open stretch of lawn that lay between us and the old negro cabins. In another moment an old woman, her face twitching with terror, had thrown herself at our feet in a species of convulsion.

"De ha'nt! De ha'nt! He's a-beckoning," was all we could make out between her moans.

The other negroes came pouring out from the kitchen and gathered in a frenzied circle about the writhing woman. Mose, I noted, was among them; he could at least prove an alibi this time.

"Here Mose, quick! Get us some torches," Radnor called. "We'll fetch that ha'nt up here to answer for himself.—It's old Aunt Sukie," he added to me, nodding toward the woman on the ground whose spasms by this time were growing somewhat quieter. "She lives on the next plantation and was probably taking a cross cut through the laurel path that leads by the cabins. She's almost a hundred and is pretty nearly a witch herself."

Mose shambled up with some torches—pine knots dipped in tar, such as they used for hunting 'possums at night, and he and I and Radnor set out for the cabins. I noticed that none of the other negroes volunteered to assist; I also noticed that Mose went on ahead with a low whining cry which sent chills chasing up and down my back.

"What's the matter with him?" I gasped, more intent on the negro than the ghost we had come to search.

"That's the way he always hunts," Radnor laughed. "There are a good many things about Mose that you will have to get used to."

We searched the whole region of the abandoned quarters with a considerable degree of thoroughness. Three or four of the larger cabins were used as store houses for fodder; the rest were empty. We poked into all of them, but found nothing more terrifying than a few bats and owls. Though I did not give much consideration to the fact at the time, I later remembered that there was one of

the cabins which we didn't explore as thoroughly as the rest. Mose dropped his torch as we entered, and in the confusion of relighting it, the interior was somewhat slighted. In any case we unearthed no ha'nt that night; and we finally gave up the search and turned back to the house.

"I suspect," Radnor laughed, "that if the truth were known, old Aunt Sukie's beckoning ha'nt would turn out to be nothing more alarming than a white cow waving her tail."

"It's rather suggestive coming on top of the chicken episode," I observed.

"Oh, this won't be the end! We'll have ha'nt served for breakfast, dinner and supper during the rest of your stay. When the niggers begin to see things they keep it up."

When I went upstairs that night, Rad followed close on my heels to see that I had everything I needed. The room was a huge four windowed affair, furnished with a canopied bed and a mahogany wardrobe as big as a small house. The nights still being chilly, a roaring wood fire had been built, adding a note of cheerfulness to an otherwise sombre apartment.

"This was Nan's room," he said suddenly.

"Nan's room!" I echoed glancing about the shadowy interior. "Rather heavy for a girl."

"It is a trifle severe," he agreed, "but I dare say it was different when she was here. Her things are all packed away in the attic." He picked up a candle and held it so that it lighted the face of a portrait over the mantle. "That's Nan—painted when she was eighteen."

"Yes," I nodded. "I recognized her the moment I saw it. She was like that when I knew her."

"It used to hang down stairs but after her marriage my father had it brought up here. He kept the door locked until the news came that she was dead, then he turned it into a guest room. He never comes in himself; he won't look at the picture."

Radnor spoke shortly, but with an underlying note of bitterness. I could see that he felt keenly on the subject. After a few desultory words, he somewhat brusquely said good night, and left me to the memories of the place.

Instead of going to bed I set about unpacking. I was tired but wide awake. Aunt Sukie's convulsions and our torch light hunt for ghosts were novel events in my experience, and they acted as anything but a sedative. The unpacking finished, I settled myself in an easy chair before the fire and fell to studying the portrait. It was a huge canvas in the romantic fashion of Romney, with a landscape in the background. The girl was dressed in flowing pink drapery, a garden hat filled with roses swinging from her arm, a Scotch collie with great lustrous eyes pressed against her side. The pose, the attributes, were artificial; but the painter had caught the spirit. Nannie's face looked out of the frame as I remembered it from long ago. Youth and gaiety and goodness trembled on her lips and laughed in her eyes. The picture seemed a prophecy of all the happiness the future was to bring. Nannie at eighteen with life before her!

And three years later she was dying in a dreary little Western town, separated from her girlhood friends, without a word of forgiveness from her father. What had she done to deserve this fate? Merely set up her will against his, and married the man she loved. Her husband was poor, but from all I ever heard, a very decent chap. As I studied the eager smiling face, I felt a hot wave of anger against her father. What a power of vindictiveness the man must have, still to cherish rancour against a daughter fifteen years in her grave! There was something too poignantly sad about the unfulfilled hope of the picture. I blew out the candles to rid my mind of poor little Nannie's smile.

I sat for some time my eyes fixed moodily on the glowing embers, till I was roused by the deep boom of the hall clock as it slowly counted twelve. I rose with a laugh and a yawn. The first of the doctor's orders had been, "Early to bed!" I hastily made ready, but before turning in, paused for a moment by the open window, enticed by the fresh country smells of plowed land and sprouting green things, that blew in on the damp breeze. It was a wild night with a young moon hanging low in the sky. Shadows chased themselves over the lawn and the trees waved and shifted in the wind. It had been a long time since I had looked out on such a scene of peaceful tranquillity as this. New York with the hurry and rush of its streets, with the horrors of Terry's morgue, seemed to lie in another continent.

But suddenly I was recalled to the present by hearing, almost beneath me, the low shuddering squeak of an opening window. I leaned out silently alert, and to my surprise I saw Cat-Eye Mose—though it was pretty dark I could not be mistaken in his long loping run—slink out from the shadow of the house and make across the open space of lawn toward the deserted negro cabins. As he ran he was bent almost double over a large black bundle which he carried in his arms. Though I strained my eyes to follow him I could make out nothing more before he had plunged into the shadow of the laurels.

CHAPTER IV
THE HA'NT GROWS MYSTERIOUS

I waked early and hurried through with my dressing, eager to get down stairs and report my last night's finding in regard to Mose. My first impulse had been to rouse the house, but on soberer second thoughts I had decided to wait till morning. I was glad now that I had; for with the sunlight streaming in through the eastern windows, with the fresh breeze bringing the sound of twittering birds, life seemed a more cheerful affair than it had the night before, and the whole aspect of the ha'nt took on a distinctly humorous tone.

A ghost who wafted roast chickens through the air and out of doors on a breeze of its own constructing, appealed to me as having an original mind. Since my midnight discovery I felt pretty certain that I could identify the ghost; and as I recalled the masterly way in which Mose had led and directed the hunt, I decided that he was cleverer than Rad had given him credit for. I went down stairs with my eyes and ears wide open prepared for further revelations. The problems of my profession had never led me into any consideration of the supernatural, and the rather evanescent business of hunting down a ha'nt came as a welcome contrast to the very material details of my recent forgery case. I had found what Terry would call a counter-irritant.

It was still early, and neither the Colonel nor Radnor had appeared; but Solomon was sweeping off the portico steps and I addressed myself to him. He was rather coy at first about discussing the matter of the ha'nt, as he scented my scepticism, but in the end he volunteered:

"Some says de ha'nt's a woman dat one o' de Gaylords long time ago, should o' married an' didn't, an' dat pined away an' died. An' some says it's a black man one o' dem whupped to deaf."

"Which do you think it is?" I inquired.

"Bress yuh, Marse Arnold, I ain't thinkin' nuffen. Like es not hit's bofe. When one sperrit gits oneasy 'pears like he stir up all de odders. Dey gets so lonely like lyin' all by dereselves in de grave dat dey're 'most crazy for company. An' when dey cayn't get each odder dey'll take humans. De human what's consorted wid a gohs, Marse Arnold, he's nebber hisself no moah. He's sort uh half-minded like Mose."

"Is that what's the matter with Mose?" I pursued tentatively. "Does he consort with ghosts?"

"Mose was bawn dat way, but I reckon maybe dat was what was de matter wid his mudder, an' he cotched it."

"That was rather an unusual thing, last night, wasn't it, for a ha'nt to steal a chicken?"

"'Pears like ha'nts must have dere jokes like odder folkses," was as far as Solomon would go.

At breakfast I repeated what I had seen the night before, and to my indignation both Radnor and my uncle took it calmly.

"Mose is only a poor half witted fellow but he's as honest as the day," the Colonel declared, "and I won't have him turned into a villain for your entertainment."

"He may be honest," I persisted, "but just the same he knows what became of that chicken! And what's more, if you look about the house you'll find there's something else missing."

The Colonel laughed good-naturedly.

"If it raises your suspicions to have Mose prowling around in the night, you'll have to get used to suspicions; for you'll have 'em during the rest of your stay. I've known Mose to stop out in the woods for three nights running—he's as much an animal as he is a man; but he's a tame animal, and you needn't be afraid of him. If you'd followed him and his bundle last night I reckon you'd have made a mighty queer discovery. He has his own little amusements and they aren't exactly ours, but since he doesn't hurt anybody what's the use in bothering? I've known Mose for well on to thirty years, and I've never yet known him to do a meanness to any human being. There aren't many white folks I can say the same of."

I did not pursue the subject with the Colonel, but I later suggested to Rad that we continue our investigation. He echoed his father's laugh. If we set out to investigate all the imaginings that came into the niggers' heads we should have our hands full, was his reply. I dropped the matter for the time being, but I was none the less convinced that Mose and the ghost were near relations; and I determined to keep an eye on him in the future, at least in so far as one could keep an eye on so slippery an individual.

In pursuance of this design, I took the opportunity that first morning, while Rad and his father were engaged with the veterinary surgeon who had come to doctor a sick colt, of strolling in the direction of the deserted cabins.

It was a damp malarious looking spot, though I dare say in the old days when the land was drained, it had been healthy enough. Just below the cabins lay the largest of the four pools which gave the plantation its name. The other three lying in the pastures higher up were used for watering the stock and were kept clean and free from plant growth. But the lower pool, abandoned like the cabins, had been allowed to overflow its banks until it was completely surrounded with rushes and lily pads. A rank growth of willow trees hung over the water and shut out all but the merest glint of sunlight.

Above this pool the cabins stretched in a double row occupying the base of the declivity on which the "big house" stood. There were as many as a dozen, I should think, built of logs and unpainted shack, consisting for the most part of a single large room, though a few had a loft above and a rough lean-to in the rear. A walk bordered by laurels stretched down the center between the two rows, and as the trees had not been clipped for a good many years, the shade was somewhat sombre. Add to this the fact that one or two of the roofs had fallen in, that the hinges were missing from several doors, that there was not a whole pane of glass in all the dozen cabins, and it will readily be seen that the place gave rise to no very cheerful fancies. I wondered that the Colonel did not have the houses pulled down; they were not a souvenir of past times which I myself should have cared to preserve.

The damp earth where the shade was thickest, plainly showed the marks of foot-prints—some made by bare feet, some by shoes—but I could not follow them for more than a yard or so, and I could not be certain they were not our own traces of the night before. I poked into every one of the cabins, but found nothing suspicious about their appearance. I did not, to be sure, ascend to any of the half dozen lofts, as there were no stairs and no suggestion of a ladder anywhere about. The open traps however which led to them were so thickly festooned with spider webs and dirt, that it did not seem possible that anyone had passed through for a dozen years. Finding no sign of habitation, either human or spiritual, I finally turned back to the house with a philosophic shrug and the reflection that Cat-Eye Mose's nocturnal vagaries were no affair of mine.

During the next few days we in the front part of the house heard only faint echoes of the excitement, though I believe that the ha'nt, both past and present, was the chief topic of conversation among the negroes, not only at Four-Pools but among the neighboring plantations as well. I spent my time those first few days in getting acquainted with my new surroundings. The chief business of the farm was horse raising, and the Colonel kept a well stocked stable. A riding horse was put at my disposal, and in company with Radnor I explored the greater part of the valley.

We visited at a number of houses in the neighborhood, but there was one in particular where we stopped most frequently, and it did not take me long to discover the reason. "Mathers Hall", an ivy-covered rambling structure, red brick with white trimmings—in style half colonial, half old English—was situated a mile or so from Four-Pools. The Hall had sheltered three generations of Matherses, and the fourth generation was growing up. There was a huge family, mostly girls, who had married and moved away to Washington or Richmond or Baltimore. They all came back in the summer however bringing their babies with them, and the place was the center of gaiety in the neighborhood. There was just one unmarried daughter left—Polly, nineteen years old, and the most heartlessly charming young person it has ever been my misfortune to meet. As is likely to be the case with the baby of a large family, Polly was thoroughly spoiled, but that fact did not in the least diminish her charm.

Report had it, at the time of my arrival, that after refusing every marriageable man in the county, she was now trying to make up her mind between Jim Mattison and Radnor. Whether or not these statistics were exaggerated, I cannot say, but in any case the many other aspirants for her favor had tacitly dropped out of the running, and the race was clearly between the two.

It seemed to me, had I been Polly, that it would not take me long to decide. Rad was as likable a young fellow as one would ever meet; he came from one of the best families in the county, with the prospect of inheriting at his father's death a very fair sized fortune. It struck me that a girl would have to search a good while before discovering an equally desirable husband. But I was surprised to find that this was not the general opinion in the neighborhood. Radnor's reputation, I learned with something of a shock, was far from what it should have been. I was told with a meaning undertone that he "favored" his brother Jeff. Though many of the stories were doubtless exaggerated, I learned subsequently that there was too much truth in some of them. It was openly said that Polly Mathers would be doing a great deal better if she chose young Mattison, for though he might not have the prospect of as much money as Radnor Gaylord, he was infinitely the steadier of the two. Mattison was a good-looking and rather ill-natured young giant, but it did not strike me at the time, nor later in the light of succeeding events, that he was particularly endowed with brains. By way of occupation, he was described as being in "politics"; at that time he was sheriff of the county, and was fully aware of the importance of the office.

I fear that Polly had a good deal of the coquette in her make-up, and she thoroughly enjoyed the jealousy between the two young men. Whenever Radnor by any chance incurred her displeasure, she retaliated by transferring her smiles to Mattison; and the virtuous young sheriff took good care that if Rad committed any slips, Polly should hear of them. As a result, they succeeded in keeping his temper in a very inflammable state.

I had not been long at Four-Pools before I commenced to see that there was an undercurrent to the life of the household which I had not at first suspected. The Colonel had grown strict as he grew old; his experience with his elder son had made him bitter, and he did not adopt the most diplomatic way of dealing with Radnor. The boy had inherited a good share of his father's stubborn temper and indomitable will; the two, living alone, inevitably clashed. Radnor at times seemed possessed of the very devil of perversity; and if he ever drank or gambled, it was as much to assert his independence as for any other reason. There were days when he and his father were barely on speaking terms.

Life at the plantation, however, was for the most part easy-going and flexible, as is likely to be the case in a bachelor establishment. We dropped cigar ashes anywhere we pleased, cocked our feet on the parlor table if we saw fit, and let the dogs troop all over the place. I spent the greater part of my time on horseback, riding about the country with Radnor on business for the farm. He, I soon discovered, did most of the actual work, though his father was still the nominal head of affairs. The raising of thorough-breds is no longer the lucrative business that it used to be, and it required a good manager to bring the balance out on the right side of the ledger. Rad was such a spectacular looking young fellow that I was really surprised to find what sound business judgment he possessed. He insisted upon introducing modern methods where his father would have been content to drift along in the casual manner of the old South, and his clear-sightedness more than doubled the income of the place.

In the healthy out-of-door life I soon forgot that nerves existed. The only thing which at all marred the enjoyment of those first few days was the knowledge of occasional clashings between Radnor and his father. I think that they were both rather ashamed of these outbreaks, and I noticed that they tried to conceal the fact from me by an elaborate if somewhat stiff courtesy toward each other.

In order to make clear the puzzling series of events which followed, I must go back to, I believe, the fifth night of my arrival. Radnor was giving a dance at Four-Pools for the purpose, he said, of introducing me into society; though as a matter of fact Polly Mathers was the guest of honor. In

any case the party was given, and everyone in the neighborhood (the term "neighborhood" is broad in Virginia; it describes a ten mile radius) both young and old came in carriages or on horseback; the younger ones to dance half the night, the older ones to play cards and look on. I met a great many pretty girls that evening—the South deserves its reputation—but Polly Mathers was by far the prettiest; and the contest for her favors between Radnor and young Mattison was spirited and open. Had Rad consulted his private wishes, the sheriff would not have been among the guests.

It was getting on toward the end of the evening and the musicians, a band of negro fiddlers made up from the different plantations, were resting after a Virginia reel that had been more a romp than a dance, when someone—I think it was Polly herself—suggested that the company adjourn to the laurel walk to see if the ha'nt were visible. The story of old Aunt Sukie's convulsions and of the spirited roast chicken had spread through the countryside, and there had been a good many laughing allusions to it during the evening. Running upstairs in search of a hat I met Rad on the landing, buttoning something white inside his coat, something that to my eyes looked suspiciously like a sheet. He laughed and put his finger on his lips as he went on down to join the others.

It was a bright moonlight night almost as light as day. We moved across the open lawn in a fairly compact body. The girls, though they had been laughing all the evening at the exploits of the ha'nt, showed a cautious tendency to keep on the inside. Rad was in the front ranks leading the hunt, but I noticed as we entered the shrubbery that he disappeared among the shadows, and I for one was fairly certain that our search would be rewarded. We paused in a group at the nearer end of the row of cabins and stood waiting for the ha'nt to show himself. He was obliging. Four or five minutes, and a faint flutter of white appeared in the distance at the farther end of the laurel walk. Then as we stood with expectant eyes fixed on the spot, we saw a tall white figure sway across a patch of moonlight with a beckoning gesture in our direction, while the breeze bore a faintly whispered, "Come! Come!" We were none of us overbold; our faith was not strong enough to run the risk of spoiling the illusion. With shrieks and laughter we turned and made helter-skelter for the house, breaking in among the elder members of the party with the panting announcement, "We've seen the ha'nt!"

Polly loitered on the veranda while supper was being served, waiting, I suspect for Radnor to reappear. I joined her, very willing indeed that the young man should delay. Polly, her white dress gleaming in the moonlight, her eyes filled with laughter, her cheeks glowing with excitement, was the most entrancing little creature I have ever seen. She was so bubbling over with youth and light-heartedness that I felt, in contrast, as if I were already tottering on the brink of the grave. I was just thirty that summer, but if I live to be a hundred I shall never feel so old again.

"Well Solomon," I remarked as I helped myself to some cakes he was passing, "we've been consorting with ghosts tonight."

"I reckon dis yere gohs would answer to de name o' Marse Radnah," said Solomon, with a wise shake of his head. "But just de same it ain't safe to mock at ha'nts. Dey'll get it back at you when you ain't expectin' it!"

After an intermission of half an hour or so the music commenced again, but still no Radnor. Polly cast more than one glance in the direction of the laurels and the sparkle in her eyes grew ominous. Presently young Mattison appeared in the doorway and asked her to come in and dance, but she said that she was tired, and we three stood laughing and chatting for some ten minutes longer, when a step suddenly sounded on the gravel path and Radnor rounded the corner of the house. As the bright moonlight fell on his face, I stared at him in astonishment. He was pale to his very lips and there were strained anxious lines beneath his eyes.

"What's the matter, Radnor?" Polly cried. "You look as if you'd found the ha'nt!"

He made an effort at composure and laughed in return, though to my ears the laugh sounded very hollow.

"I believe this is my dance, isn't it, Polly?" he asked, joining us with rather an over-acted air of carelessness.

"Your dance was over half an hour ago," Polly returned. "This is Mr. Mattison's."

She turned indoors with the young man, and Rad following on their heels, made his way to the punch bowl where I saw him toss off three or four glasses with no visible interval between them. I, decidedly puzzled, watched him for the rest of the evening. He appeared to have some disturbing matter on his mind, and his gaiety was clearly forced.

It was well on toward morning when the party broke up, and after some slight conversation of a desultory sort the Colonel, Rad and I went up to our rooms. Whether it was the excitement of the evening or the coffee I had drunk, in any case I was not sleepy. I turned in, only to lie for an hour or more with my eyes wide open staring at a patch of moonlight on the ceiling. My old trouble of insomnia had overtaken me again. I finally rose and paced the floor in sheer desperation, and then paused to stare out of the window at the peaceful moonlit picture before me.

Suddenly I heard, as on the night of my arrival, the soft creaking of the French window in the library, which opened on to the veranda just below me. Quickly alert, I leaned forward determined to learn if possible the reason for Mose's midnight wanderings. To my astonishment it was Radnor who stepped out from the shadow of the house, carrying a large black bundle in his arms. I clutched the frame of the window and stared after him in dumb amazement, as he crossed the strip of moonlit lawn and plunged into the shadows of the laurel growth.

CHAPTER V
CAT-EYE MOSE CREATES A SENSATION

For the next week or so things went rather strangely on the plantation. I knew very well that there was an undercurrent of which I was supposed to know nothing, and I appeared politely unconscious; but I won't say but that I kept my eyes and ears as wide open as was possible without appearing to spy. The chicken episode and Aunt Sukie's convulsions turned out to be only the beginning of the ha'nt excitement; scarcely a day passed without some fresh supernatural visitation. Radnor pooh-poohed over the matter before the Colonel and me, but with the negroes I know that he encouraged rather than discouraged their fears, until there was not a man on our own or any of the neighboring plantations who would have ventured to step foot within the laurel walk, either at night or in the daytime—at least there was only one. Cat-Eye Mose took the matter of the ha'nt without undue emotion, a point which struck me as suggestive, for I knew that Mose was as superstitious as the rest when the occasion warranted.

Once at least I saw Radnor and Mose in consultation, and though I did not know the subject of the conference my suspicions were very near the surface. I came upon them in the stables talking in low tones, Rad apparently explaining, and Mose listening with the air of strained attention which the slightest mental effort always called to his face. At my appearance Radnor raised his voice and added one or two directions as to how his guns were to be cleaned. It was evident that the subject had been changed.

Everything that was missing about the place—and there seemed to be an abnormal amount—was attributed to the ha'nt. I do not doubt but that the servants made the ha'nt a convenient scapegoat to answer for their own shortcomings, but still there were several suggestive depredations—horse blankets from the stable, clothes from the line and more edibles than roast chicken from Nancy's larder. The climax of absurdity was reached when there disappeared a rather trashy French novel, which I had left in the summer house. I asked Solomon about it, thinking that one of the servants might have brought it in. Solomon rolled his eyes and suggested that the ha'nt had cotched it. I laughingly commented upon the occurrence at the supper table and the next day Rad handed me the book; Mose had found it, he said, and had brought it up to his room.

All of these minor occurrences were stretched over a period of, say ten days after the party, and though it gave me the uncomfortable feeling that there was something in the air which I did not understand, I did not let it worry me unduly. Radnor seemed to be on the inside track of whatever was going on, and he was old enough to take care of his own affairs. I knew that he had more than once visited the laurel walk after the house was supposed to be asleep; but I kept this knowledge to myself, and allowed no hint to reach the Colonel.

I had, during these first few weeks, all the opportunity I wished of studying Mose's character. Radnor was occupied a good deal of the time—spring on a big river plantation is a busy season—and as I had professed myself fond of shooting, the Colonel turned me over to the care of Cat-Eye Mose. Had I myself been choosing, I should have selected another guide. But Mose was the best hunter on the place, and as the Colonel was quite untroubled by his vagaries, it never occurred to him that I might not be equally confident. In time I grew used to the fellow, but I will admit that at first I accepted his services with some honest trepidation. As I watched him going ahead of me, crouching behind bushes, springing from hummock to hummock, silent and alert, quivering like an animal in search of prey, my attention was centered on him rather than on any possible quarry.

I shall never forget running across him in the woods one afternoon when I had gone out snipe shooting alone. Whether he had followed me or whether we had chosen the same vicinity by chance, I do not know; but at any rate as I came out from the underbrush on the edge of a low, swampy place,

I almost stepped on the man. He was stretched face downward on the black, oozy soil with his arm buried in a hole at the foot of a tree.

"Why Mose!" I cried in amazement, "what on earth are you doing here?"

He responded without raising his head.

"I's aftah a snake, sah. I see a big fat gahtah snake a-lopin' into dis yere hole, an' he's skulkin' dar now thinkin' like he gwine to fool me. But he cayn't do dat, sah. I's got 'im by de tail, an' I'll fotch 'im out."

He drew forth as he spoke a huge black and yellow snake, writhing and hissing, and proceeded to smash its head with a stone. I shut my eyes during the operation and when I opened them again I saw to my horror that he was stuffing the carcass in the front of his shirt.

"Good heavens, Mose!" I cried, aghast. "What are you going to do with that?"

"Boil it into oil, sah, to scar de witches off."

Inquiry at the house that night brought out the fact that this was one of Mose's regular occupations. Snake's oil was in general favor among the negroes as a specific against witches, and Mose was the chief purveyor of the lotion. Taken all in all he was about as queer a human being as I have ever come across, and I fancy, had I been a psychologist instead of a lawyer, I might have found him an entertaining study.

I heard about this time some fresh rumors in regard to Radnor; one—and it came pretty straight—that he'd just lost a hundred dollars at poker. A hundred dollars may not sound like a very big loss in these days of bridge, but it was large for that place, and it represented to Radnor exactly two months' pay. As overseer of the plantation, the Colonel paid him six hundred dollars a year, a little enough sum considering the work he did. Rad had nothing in his own right; aside from his salary he was entirely dependent on his father, and it struck me as more than foolish for a young man who was contemplating marriage to throw away two months' earnings in a single game of poker. The conviction crossed my mind that perhaps after all Polly was wise to delay.

I heard another rumor however which was graver than the poker affair; it was only a rumor, and when traced to its source turned out to be nothing more tangible than somebody's hazarded guess, but without the slightest cause the same suspicion had already presented itself to me. And that was, that the ha'nt was a very flesh and blood woman. Radnor was clearly in some sort of trouble; he was moody and irritable, so sharp with the farm hands that several of them left, and unusually taciturn with the Colonel and me. To make matters worse Polly Mathers was treating him with marked indifference, and openly bestowing her smiles upon Mattison; what the trouble was I could only conjecture, but I feared that she too had been hearing rumors.

The ha'nt stories had been repeated and exaggerated until they contained no semblance of truth. By this time, not only the laurel walk was haunted, but the spring-hole as well; and it soon became a region of even greater fear than the deserted cabins. The "spring-hole" was a natural cavity in the side of a hill a half mile or so back from the house. It was out of this cavity that the underground stream flowed which fed the pools, and furnished such valuable irrigation to the place. All that part of Virginia is undermined with limestone caverns, and my uncle's was by no means the only plantation that could boast the distinction of a private cave. The entrance was half hidden among rugged piled-up boulders dripping with moisture; and was not inviting. I remembered chasing a rabbit into this cavern when I was a boy, and though it would have been an easy matter to follow him, I preferred to stay outside in the sunshine. The spring-hole, then, was haunted. This did not strike me as strange. I rather wondered that it had not been from the first; it was a likely place for ghosts. But the thing which did surprise me, was the fact that it was Mose who brought the news.

We were sitting on the portico after supper one night—it was almost dark and the glow from our cigars was the one visible point in the scenery—when Mose came bounding across the lawn with his peculiar loping run and fairly groveled at Radnor's feet, his teeth chattering with fear.

"I's seen de ha'nt, Marse Rad; de sho nuff ha'nt all dressed in black an' risin' outen de spring-hole."

"You fool!" Radnor cried. "Get on your feet and behave yourself."

"It was de debbil," Mose chattered. "His face was black an' his eyes was fire."

"You've been drinking, Mose," Radnor said sharply. "Get off to the quarters where you belong, and don't let me see you again until you are sober," and he shunted the fellow out of the way before he had time to say any more.

I myself was tolerably certain that Mose had not been drinking; that, at least, was not in the list of his peculiar vices. He appeared to be thoroughly frightened—if not, he was a most consummate actor. In the light of what I already knew, I was considerably puzzled by this fresh manifestation. The Colonel fretted and fumed up and down the veranda, muttering something about these fool niggers all being alike. He had bragged considerably about Mose's immunity in respect to ha'nts, and I think he was rather dashed at his favorite's falling-off. I held my peace, and Radnor returned in a few minutes.

"Rad," said the Colonel, "this thing's going too far. The whole place is infested with ghosts; they'll be invading the house next and we won't have a servant left on the place. Can't you do something to stop it?"

Radnor shrugged his shoulders and said that it was a pretty tough job to lay a ghost when there were twenty niggers on the place, but that he would see what he could do; and he presently drifted off again.

That same night about ten o'clock I was reading before going to bed, when a knock sounded on the door, and Radnor appeared. He was unusually restless and ill at ease. He referred in a jesting fashion to the ha'nt, discussed some neighborhood gossip, and finally quite abruptly inquired:

"Arnold, can you lend me some money?"

"Yes," I said, "I think so; how much do you want?"

"A hundred dollars if you can spare it. Fact is I'm a little hard up, and I've got a bill to meet. I have some money invested but I can't put my hands on it just this minute. I'll pay you in a week or so as soon as I get some cash—I wouldn't ask you, only my father is so blamed reluctant about paying my salary ahead of time."

I wrote out a check and handed it to him.

"Rad," I said, "you're perfectly welcome to the money; I'm glad to accommodate you, but if you'll excuse my mentioning it, I think you ought to pull up a bit on this poker business. You don't earn so much that if you're thinking of getting married you can afford to throw any of it away.—I'm only speaking for your good; it's no affair of mine," I added as I saw his face flush.

He hesitated a moment with the check in his hand; I know that he wanted to give it back, but he was evidently too hard pressed.

"Oh, keep the money!" I said. "I don't want to pry into your private affairs, only," I laughed, "I do want to see you win out ahead of Mattison, and I'm afraid you're not going about it the right way."

"Thank you, Arnold," he returned, "I want to win a great deal more than you want me to—and if it's gambling you're afraid of, you can ease your mind, for I've sworn off. It's not a poker debt I want this money for tonight; I wouldn't be so secretive about the business, only it concerns another person more than me."

"Radnor," I said, "I heard an ugly rumor the other day. I heard that the ghost was a live woman who was living in the deserted cabins under your connivance. I didn't believe it, but just the same it is not a story which you can afford to have even whispered."

Radnor raised his head sharply.

"Ah, I see!" His eyes wavered a moment and then fixed themselves miserably on my face. "Has—has Polly Mathers heard that?"

"Yes," I returned, "I fancy she has."

He struck the table with a quick flash of anger.

"It's a damned lie! And it comes from Jim Mattison."

And now as to the events which followed during the night. I've repeated them so many times to so many different persons that it is difficult for me to recall just what were my original sensations. I went to bed but I didn't go to sleep; this ha'nt business was getting on my nerves almost as badly as the Patterson-Pratt case. After a time I heard someone let himself softly out of the house; I knew well that it was Radnor and I didn't get up to look. I didn't want the appearance even to myself of spying upon him. After three quarters of an hour or so I was suddenly startled alert by hearing the squeak-squeak of a whippletree out on the lawn. It was the Colonel's buckboard which stood in need of oiling; I recognized the sound. Curiosity was too much for me this time. I slipped out of bed and hurried to the window. It was pretty dark outside, but there was a faint glimmer of starlight.

"Whoa, Jennie Loo; whoa!" I heard Rad's voice scarcely above a whisper, and I saw the outline of the cart plainly with Rad driving, and either some person or some large bundle on the seat beside him. It was on the side farthest from me, and was too vague to be distinguished. He made a wide detour of the house across the grass, and struck the driveway at the foot of the lawn; the reason for this manœuvre was evident—the gravel drive from the stables passed directly under the Colonel's window. I went back to bed half worried, half relieved. I strongly suspected that this was the end of the ghost; but I could not help puzzling over the part that Radnor had played in the little comedy—if comedy it were. The stories that I had heard about some of his disreputable associates returned to my mind with unpleasant emphasis.

I had gradually dozed off, when half waking, half sleeping, I heard the patter of bare feet on the veranda floor. The impression was not distinct enough to arouse me, and I have never been perfectly sure that I was not dreaming. I do not know how much time elapsed after this—I was sound asleep—when I was suddenly startled awake by a succession of the most horrible screams I have ever heard. In an instant I was on my feet in the middle of the floor. Striking a match and lighting a candle, I grabbed an umbrella—it was the only semblance of a weapon anywhere at hand—and dashed into the hall. The Colonel's door was flung open at the same instant, and he appeared on the threshold, revolver in hand.

"Eh, Arnold, what's happened?" he cried.

"I don't know," I gasped, "I'm going down to see."

We tumbled down stairs at such a rate that the candle went out, and we groped along in total darkness toward the rear of the house from where the sounds were coming. The cries had died down by this time into a horrible inarticulate wail, half animal, half human. I recognized the tones with a cold thrill; it was Mose. We found him groveling on the floor of the little passage that led from the dining-room to the serving room. I struck a light and we bent over him. I hated to look, expecting from the noise he was making to find him lying in a pool of blood. But he was entirely whole; there was no blood visible and we could find no broken bones. Apparently there was nothing the matter beyond fear, and of that he was nearly dead. He crawled to the Colonel and clung to his feet chattering an unintelligible gibberish. His eyes rolling wildly in the dim light, showed an uncanny yellow gleam. I could see where he got his name.

The Colonel's own nerves were beginning to assert themselves and with an oath he cuffed the fellow back to a state of coherence.

"Stand up, you blithering fool, and tell us what you mean by raising such a fuss."

Mose finally found his tongue but we still could make nothing of his story. He had been out "prospectin' 'round," and when he came in to go to bed—the house servants slept in a wing over the rear gallery—he met the ha'nt face to face standing in the dining-room doorway. He was so tall that his head reached the ceiling and he was so thin that you could see right through him. At the remembrance Mose began to shiver again. We propped him up with some whiskey and sent him off to bed still twittering with terror.

The Colonel was bent on routing out Radnor to share the excitement and I with some difficulty restrained him, knowing full well that Rad was not in the house. We made a search of the premises to assure ourselves that there was nothing tangible about Mose's ha'nt; but I was in such a hurry to get the Colonel safely upstairs again, that our search was somewhat cursory. We both overlooked the little office that opened off the dining-room. In spite of my manœuvres the Colonel entered the library first and discovered that the French window was open; he laid no stress on this however, supposing that Mose was the guilty one. He bolted it with unusual care, and I with equal care slipped back and unbolted it. I finally persuaded him that Mose's ha'nt was merely the result of a fevered imagination fed on a two weeks' diet of ghost stories, and succeeded in getting him back to bed without discovering Radnor's absence. I lay awake until I heard the sound of carriage wheels returning across the lawn, and, a few minutes later, footsteps enter the house and tip-toe upstairs. Then as daylight was beginning to show in the east I finally fell asleep, worn out with puzzling my head for an explanation which should cover at once Rad's nocturnal drive and Mose's ha'nt.

CHAPTER VI
WE SEND FOR A DETECTIVE

I slept late the next morning, and came down stairs to find the Colonel pacing the length of the dining-room, his head bent, a worried frown upon his brow. He came to a sudden halt at my appearance and regarded me a moment without speaking. I could see that something of moment had happened, but I could fathom nothing of its nature from his expression.

"Good morning, Arnold," he said with a certain grim pleasantness. "I have just been making a discovery. It appears that Mose's ha'nt amounted to more than we gave him credit for. The safe was robbed during the night."

"The safe robbed!" I cried. "How much was taken?"

"Something over a hundred dollars in cash, and a number of important papers."

He threw open the door of the little office, and waved his hand toward the safe which occupied one end. The two iron doors were wide open, the interior showing a succession of yawning pigeon holes with the cash drawer, half pulled out and empty. Several papers were spilled on the floor underneath.

"He evidently had no use for my will nor for Kennisburg street railway stock—I don't blame him; it wouldn't sell for the paper it's written on."

Radnor's step sounded on the stair as he came running down—whistling I noted.

"Ah—Rad," the Colonel called from the office doorway. "You're a good sleeper."

Radnor stopped his whistle as his eye fell upon our faces, and his own took on a look of anxiety.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Has anything happened?"

"It appears the ha'nt has robbed the safe."

"The ha'nt?" Rad's face went visibly white, and then in a moment it cleared; his expression was divided between relief and dismay.

"Oh!" he said, "you've missed the money? I meant to get down first and tell you about it, but overslept. I took a hundred dollars out of the safe last night because I wanted the cash—you had gone to bed so I didn't say anything about it. I will ride into the village this morning and get it out of the bank in time to pay the men."

"You took a hundred dollars," the Colonel repeated. "And did you take the securities also and the bag of coin?" He waved his hand toward the safe. Radnor's eye followed and his jaw dropped.

"I didn't touch anything but the roll of bills in the cash drawer. What's missing?"

"Five thousand dollars in bonds, a couple of insurance policies and one or two deeds—also the bag of coin. Mose saw the ha'nt in the night, and Arnold and I came down to investigate; we unfortunately neglected the office in our search, or we might have cornered him. Do you happen to remember whether or not you closed the safe after you took out the money, and would you mind telling me why you needed a hundred dollars in such a hurry that you couldn't wait until the bank opened?"

The troubled line on Radnor's brow deepened.

"I think I closed the safe," he said, "but I don't remember. It's barely possible that I didn't lock it; you know we haven't always kept it locked, especially when there wasn't money in it.—It never occurred to me that anyone would steal the bonds. I can't imagine what it means."

"You haven't answered my question.—Why did you need a hundred dollars in cash after ten o'clock last night?"

"I am sorry, father, but I can't answer that question. It's a private matter."

"Indeed! You are sure that you did not take the bonds as well and have forgotten it?"

"I took one hundred dollars in bills and nothing else. I took that merely because it was my only way of cashing a check. I have frequently cashed my private checks, when we had a surplus on hand

and I didn't want the bother of going in to the bank. So long as I balance the books all right, I see no reason why I should not do so."

"H'm!" said the Colonel. "Two days ago you came to me and wanted two months' pay in advance because you had overdrawn your bank account, and I refused to give it to you. Where, may I ask, were you intending to get the hundred dollars to pay back this amount?"

A quick flush spread over Radnor's face.

"I already had it—Arnold will tell you that, for I borrowed it of him."

"Certainly," I put in pacifically—"that's all settled between Rad and me. I have his note and was glad to accommodate him."

"Don't you get enough from me, that you must ask the guests in my house to supply you with money?"

Radnor's flush deepened but he said nothing. I could see by his eyes however that he would not stand much more.

"Then after you had helped yourself to the money, the bonds were stolen by someone else?" said the Colonel.

"So it appears," said Radnor.

"And have you any theory as to the identity of the thief?"

Rad hesitated a visible instant before replying. The flush left his face and the pallor came back, but in the end he raised his eyes and answered steadily.

"No, father, I have not. I am as much mystified as you are."

"And you heard nothing in the night? As I said before, you are an excellent sleeper!"

Rad caught an ironical undertone in his father's voice.

"I don't understand," he said.

"I am a trifle deaf myself, but still he wakened me.—It's strange that you should be the only one in the house who could sleep through it."

"Sleep through what? I don't know what you're talking about."

I cut in hastily and explained our adventure with Mose's ha'nt.

Radnor listened with troubled eyes but made no comment at the end. His father was watching him keenly, and I don't know whether it was intuition or some knowledge of the truth that made him suddenly put the question:

"You were of course in the house all night?"

"No," Radnor returned, "I was not. I didn't get in till early this morning and I suppose the excitement occurred during my absence."

"I suppose I may not be permitted to inquire where you spent the night—that too is a private matter?"

"Yes," said Radnor, easily, "that too is a private matter."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.